12 WILD WESTERN STO

COWBOY SHORT STORIES

10¢

NOVEMBER

GUN ORPHAN OF THE OWL-HOOT

by

ED EARL REPP

FIGHTING COWARD

a great new yarn by

E. B

mycomicshop

I WILL SEND MY FIRST LESSON FREE

It Shows How I Train You at Home in Your Spare Time for a

GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 25 Years
He has directed the training of more men for the Radio Industry than anyone else.

Clip the coupon and mail it. I'm certain I can train you at home in your spare time to be a Radio Technician. I will send you my first lesson free. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand. Judge for yourself whether my course is planned to help you get a good job in Radio, a young, growing field with a future. You don't need to give up your present job, or spend a lot of money to become a Radio Technician. I train you at home in your spare time.

Jobs Like These Go To Men Who Know Radio

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay well for trained men. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, service men in good-pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Radio jobbers and dealers employ installation and service men. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices, are newer fields offering good opportunities to qualified men. And my course includes Television, which promises to open many good jobs soon.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

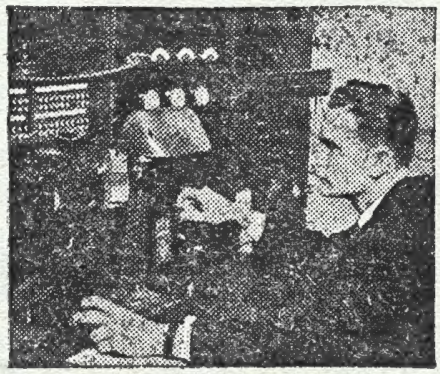
Radio is already one of the country's large industries even though it is still young and growing. The arrival of Television, the use of Radio principles in industry, are but a few of many recent Radio developments. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs, etc. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use and thousands more are being sold every day. In every branch Radio is offering more opportunities—opportunities for which I give you the required knowledge of Radio at home in your spare time. Yes, the few hundred $30, $40, $50 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands.

Many Make $5 to $10 a Week Extra In Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to my regular course, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which start showing you how to do actual Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training, I send plans and directions which have helped many make from $200 to $500 a year in spare time while learning.

You Get Practical Experience While Learning

I send you special Radio equipment; show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio and Television receivers, broadcasting station and loudspeaker installations. My 50-50 method of training gives you both printed instruction and actual work with Radio parts—makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL, ALL-WAVE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make more money fixing Radio sets while learning and to equip you with a professional instrument for full time work after you graduate.



Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act today. Mail the coupon for Sample Lesson and my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." They point out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tell about my course in Radio and Television; show letters from men I have trained telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9MA2,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

I TRAINED THESE MEN

Service Manager for Four Stores

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N.R.I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M - - Furniture Co. for their four stores."—JAMES E. RYAN, 1543 Slade St., Fall River, Mass.

Owns Shop, Makes $3,000 a Year

"Before taking your Course I earned about 17½ cents per hour as a truck driver. When I had completed 20 lessons I started service work. During the last year I have made about $3,000 in Radio. I now own my own shop." — KARL KELLY, 306 W. Calhoun St., Magnolia, Ark.

$10 to $20 Week in Spare Time

"I repaired many Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson, and I have made enough money to pay for my Radio course and also my instruments. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 to $20 a week—just spare time." JOHN JERRY, 1529 Arapahoe St., Denver, Colo.

MAIL COUPON NOW!

GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK SAMPLE LESSON **FREE**

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 9MA2,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Send me FREE, without obligation, your Sample Lesson and 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio" which tells about Radio's spare time and full-time opportunities and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home to be Radio Technicians. (Write Plainly).

NAME .....AGE .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....(2FR)

A Tested WAY to BETTER PAY

COWBOY SHORT STORIES

10¢

VOL. II, NO. 4 *NOVEMBER, 1939*

12 WILD WESTERN STORIES

(1) **GUN ORPHAN OF THE OWLHOOT**.....**Ed Earl Repp** 10
Meeting that beautiful girl gave Danny Moore his first glimpse of happiness . . . but it also made him buckle on vengeance-starved sixes and vow to die in a murderer's hang-noose hell!

(2) **RIO COLT RIOT**.....**C. William Harrison** 24
His trigger style was Deputy Marshal Wink Dixon's bullet-bought insurance against a drygulching . . . yet, because he did not pack his gun for a cross draw, Dixon was fated for a renegade firing squad!

(3) **MEN MUST DIE!**.....**Adam Mann** 33
Because he could not buy that forged note for $15,000, Neil McLean was due to be gunned off of his Flying M spread . . . but McLean paid this bogus debt in hot lead —hot lead that was buried in his own dying body!

(4) **RATTLESNAKE IKE**.....**The Trail Boss** 40
A true fact feature of the west when it was wild!

(5) **THE BLOODY-HANDED ONE**.....**Charles Clay** 44
The Swede had laughed when he had hung the Chipewan's traps up in the trees, and thereby condemned the Indian and his family to a winter of starvation-hell . . . But he didn't know that a victim of the damned could call up one last bullet from the purgatory whence he was doomed!

(6) **FIGHTING COWARD**.....**E. B. Mann** 51
When Dan Coward learned that his powdersmoke redemption meant tragedy for a lovely girl, he accepted the West's most hated stigma—the coyote brand!

(7) **TERROR RIDES IN TRES PULGAS**.....**Mojave Lloyd** 58
C. A. Detective Gil Norcross's vengeance sixes were stilled . . . when his own lovely sweetheart sold him into a gun satan's bullet bondage!

(8) **DRYGULCHERS CAN'T QUIT**.....**I. L. Thompson** 67
The Cheyenne Kid could get the money for the operation that would restore little Jimmy Mackay's sight . . . by drygulching the boy's father!

(9) **SPAWN OF THE GUN-LOBO**.....**Eric Thane** 76
The Colt King of law's-end Selby offered Tombstone Frane $10,000 to leave town . . . but when he saw that his departure would change a score of kids to gallows fodder, Frane traded his sack of golden eagles for one man-blasting chunk of hot lead!

(10) **CITIZENS OF BOOTHILL**.....**Kenneth P. Wood** 85
Robbing the Union Pacific was a job for any two-bit crook . . . until Seth Kennedy and his Cheyenne Killers accepted pay to kill for the law, instead of against it!

(11) **THE FORGOTTEN SHERIFF**.....**Rollin Brown** 89
The greasy-aproned, pot-walloping Jinx was the joke of the A Bar I . . . until a bullet baptism proved that he could outsmart a range satan's leveled Colts!

(12) **THE DEAD ARE IN THE SADDLE**.....**Dick Robson** 94
Lon Haferty announced his return to the Wind River country by drilling a bush-whacker . . . but when he learned that he was a gun-ghost who had been legally declared dead, Haferty knew he was scheduled to meet that drygulcher again—in boothill!

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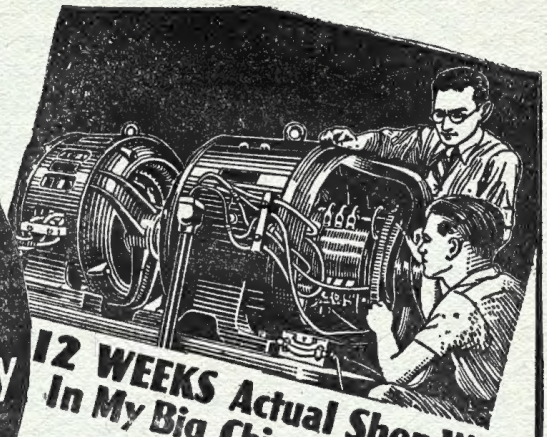
TRAIN FOR ELECTRICITY

And If You Are Short of Money

Pay Tuition AFTER GRADUATION



12 WEEKS Actual Shop Work In My Big Chicago Shops

WANT TO EARN MORE MONEY?

H. C. Lewis

Have you ever dreamed of holding down a **steady, good pay job?** Have you ever dreamed of doing the work you really like in a job that holds promise of a **real future** in the years ahead?

Well, we all know that you can't get the good things in life by just **dreaming** about them. Hundreds of fellows are today holding down mighty fine jobs with prospects of a bright future. They are filling these jobs because they had the foresight to equip themselves with the **right kind of training.** Most of these men were only average fellows a short time ago, but the proper training helped to lift them out of the low pay ranks of unskilled workers. The same opportunity is now offered to **you.**

The great fascinating field of **ELECTRICITY** offers a real future to many men and young men who are willing to prepare for a place in this giant industry.

LEARN BY PRACTICAL WORK IN COYNE SHOPS NOT BY CORRESPONDENCE OR HOME STUDY

Here at my school in Chicago, the **world's Electrical Center,** you can get **12 weeks Shop Training** in **ELECTRICITY** and **an extra 4 weeks Course in Radio** that can help give you your start towards a better job.

You will be trained on actual equipment and machinery and because of our method of training, you **don't need previous experience or a lot of education.** Many of my successful graduates never even completed Grammar School. Here in my school you work on generators, motors, dynamos, you do house wiring, wind armatures and do actual work in many other branches of electricity and right now I'm including valuable instruction in **Diesel, Electric Refrigeration** and **Air Conditioning** at **no** extra cost. Our practical shop methods make it **easier to learn—First** the instructors **tell** you **how** a thing should be done—**then** they **show** you how it should be done—**then you do the actual work yourself.**

HOUSE WIRING
only one of the many branches you "Learn By Doing."

"...Coyne has first class instructors to teach you the simplest things to start with and they have the equipment to show you these things as you advance."
Ben Rickman, S. Car.

I'LL FINANCE YOUR TRAINING

If you are short of money—you can get this training **first**—then **pay for most of it later** in easy **monthly payments,** starting **60 days** after your 12 weeks training period is over—**then you have 12 months** to complete your payments.

If you need **part time work** to help out with expenses while training in my shops, my employment department will give you their assistance to help you get it. Then after graduation this department will give you valuable **lifetime employment service.**

Send the coupon today for all details. When I get it I'll send you my big free book containing dozens of pictures of students at work in my shops. I'll also tell you about my **"Pay After Graduation" Plan,** and how many **earn while learning** and how we help our students **after graduation.** Fill in, clip coupon, **mail today for your start toward a brighter future.**

H. C. LEWIS, President

COYNE

ELECTRICAL SCHOOL

500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 89-25, Chicago

MAIL COUPON FOR CATALOG

H. C. LEWIS, President,
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL,
500 S. Paulina Street, Dept. 89-25, Chicago, Ill.

Dear Sir: Please send me free your big catalog and full particulars of your present offer, also your "Pay-Tuition-After-Graduation" Plan.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

If This Were YOU— Laid Up By

SICKNESS OR ACCIDENT—

What Would It Mean To You To Get Up To

$150.00 A MONTH?

Amazing New Policy

COSTS ONLY 3¢ A DAY

If sickness or accident should strike YOU—lay you up, disabled—stop your income, perhaps for months—don't face the additional worry of money for bills and expenses! Protect yourself and your loved ones with the remarkable low cost Sterling Sickness and Accident Policy! For only 3c a day this amazing policy provides ACTUAL CASH—to help pay bills and expenses! Pays you up to $150.00 a month for sickness, **including Hospital Benefits;** $100.00 a month for accident; pays as much as $2,500.00 for loss of limbs, sight, or accidental death, plus many other liberal benefits, as provided in policy.

Pays Cash For Common Sicknesses And All Types Of Accidents

This policy covers sicknesses common to men and women, covers all types of accidents as happen every day in or by automobiles or trucks, on street, at home, on the farm, in factory, while at work, etc. Benefits payable from FIRST DAY, as explained in policy.

MORE THAN $500,000.00 PAID

Young and old — men, women, children, ages 15 to 64 without Doctor's Examination — are eligible for this liberal insurance. More than $500,000.00 Cash Benefits already paid on Sterling Policies. Big, responsible, Legal Reserve Stock Company. $100,000.00 on deposit with State of Illinois Insurance Department for protection of all policyholders.

EASY MONTHLY TERMS

Because we deal direct with you and have no agents, your cost of this insurance is amazingly low. Only 3c a day, in easy monthly payments, brings you all these protection features. No dues — no assessments.

10 Days FREE INSPECTION

SEND NO MONEY! Here's our sensational offer. Write giving your age, and the name and relationship of your beneficiary. We will mail you Actual Policy on 10 Days FREE INSPECTION. No obligation whatever. Act now.

LIBERAL BENEFITS AT AMAZING LOW COST

AS MUCH AS **$2,500.00**

paid to you IN CASH for Accidental Death or Loss of Limbs or Eyesight.

UP TO **$150.00**

a month for sickness including Hospital Benefits.

UP TO **$100.00**

a month for disability due to accident.

$100.00

Cash paid as Emergency Aid or Identification Benefit.

OTHER LIBERAL BENEFITS

Doctor's bill for non-disabling injuries—10% increase in benefits for 5 years at no extra cost.

All Benefits as described on Policy.

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563 Jackson-Franklin Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

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Choose Your Field NOW For Success

Will you master fate or will fate master you? That's a question deserving your honest answer...right now! Actually it is largely up to you. You can do with Life almost what you will. LaSalle will help you establish yourself for real success by providing you with the comprehensive, specialized training for which it is so famous. Choose your field . . . now! Check the coupon below for the free booklet you want us to send you. It can be your first step toward assured success.

Opportunities in Traffic Management

The field of Traffic Management offers real opportunity only to the man who knows. Spare time study and the will to succeed have pushed scores of Traffic employees up the ladder to financial success. Many LaSalle-trained traffic managers—in the railroad, truck and industrial field—now command salaries of $3,000.00 to $5.000.00 a year—and better. Investigate. Find out how you can qualify for these higher positions through LaSalle home-study and guidance.

Law for Business Success

And it isn't necessary to practice law to get this Success. In fact probably most of the men who study law today have no idea of taking the bar examination or becoming lawyers—they want law training to help them master men and situations in business. You know that—

(1) the man with legal training is a leader—not a follower.

(2) legal training keens your mind—clears away the problems that stump the ordinary fellow and makes you master instead of man.

(3) knowledge of law simplifies the complications of executive work.

(4) Many top executive places are filled by men who have studied law.

No matter whether you are in a big corporation or a small business—in a city or a little town—a practical knowledge of law can hardly fail to be of real and vital help to you in making a more successful career.

In every state in the union you'll find law-trained men who came up through LaSalle. What others have done, you can do.

And LaSalle offers either a full law course leading to LL. B. or a shorter business law training—whichever you prefer. All text material, including valuable 14-volume Law Library. Training comprises the most effective features of modern law instruction.

Executive Training

Executives who are efficient managers command responsible positions and good incomes. And the need for trained executives is growing rapidly. We train you thoroughly at home in your spare time for every type of executive work—teach you the principles and practices used by our most successful business leaders and help you develop your management capacity—by a training built with the aid of outstanding executives.

Become an Expert Accountant

The Profession That Pays

The demand for skilled accountants—men who really know their business—is increasing rapidly. New state and federal legislation requires much more, and more efficient accounting from business—big and small. Corporations are in constant need of expert counsel in matters relating to Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Organization, Management, Finance. Men who prove their qualifications in this important branch of business are rapidly promoted to responsible executive positions—given an opportunity to earn real salaries. The range is from $2,000.00 to $10,000.00 a year—even to higher income figures.

Under the LaSalle Problem Method you can at home acquire a thoro understanding of Higher Accountancy, master its fundamental principles, become expert in the practical application of these principles—this without losing an hour of work or a dollar of pay.

Your training will be under the direct supervision of a staff of legal, organization and management specialists, business efficiency engineers and Certified Public Accountants.

Preliminary knowledge of bookkeeping is unnecessary. We train you from the ground up, or from where you now are, according to your individual needs.

Mr. Salesman: *What's Wrong?*

Why aren't you making more sales—more money? Is it you—or your proposition? Check up first on yourself. Other men—no better than you—have found their earnings jump and stay up when they trained with LaSalle. Literally thousands of men—many of them years at the game—have increased their sales volume and earnings through home study with LaSalle guidance. Sound—practical—usable—right from field experience. Train for top-notch production with LaSalle.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION Dept., 1172-R, Chicago

I would like to have your special booklet—without any cost or obligation to me—about my opportunities and your success training in the business field I have checked.

- ☐ Higher Accountancy
- ☐ Law: Degree of LL.B.
- ☐ Traffic Management
- ☐ Modern Salesmanship
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Commercial Law
- ☐ Expert Bookkeeping
- ☐ C. P. A. Coaching
- ☐ Industrial Management
- ☐ Modern Foremanship
- ☐ Business English
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Effective Speaking
- ☐ Stenotypy

Name..... Age.....

Position..... Address.....

Boys! Girls! Bikes for All GIVEN

NOTHING TO BUY
NO RISK, NO CASH
SEND NO MONEY
SEND NAME
MAIL COUPON!

Everybody gets a premium or Cash Commission. BIKE or other expensive Premiums YOURS for SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE big colored pictures with our famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE for CHAPS, CUTS, BURNS, SORES, etc., which you easily sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) and remitting as explained in catalog sent with goods. SPECIAL: — Catalog shows 20 Premiums for returning only $3 collected. Constant users—please write. Millions pleased. Pictures pep sales. Salve sold most calls. BE FIRST. Mail coupon Now! Wilson Chem. Co., Inc., Dept. DA-87, Tyrone, Pa.

Balloon Tires

Headlight; Horn; Tool Box; Coaster-brake. Yes, fully equipped. Chromium plated parts. What a Bike! A brand new sporty bike for ambitious boys and girls!

Electric or Hand Operated PHONOGRAPH or CASH

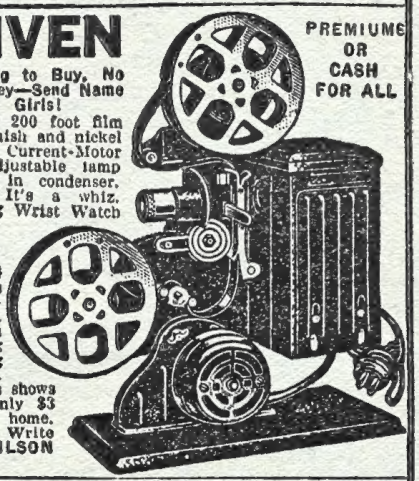
GIVEN

Send no money—Nothing to buy—MAIL COUPON! Size 9 x 9 x 8 complete with cord, plug, switch and speed control. Plays 10" records. Mellow tone! Have fun! POPULAR! YOURS—Easily sell WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE to friends at 25c (with free picture) and remit as explained in catalog. Be first. Mail coupon. Wilson Chem. Co., Inc., Dept. DA-87, Tyrone, Pa.

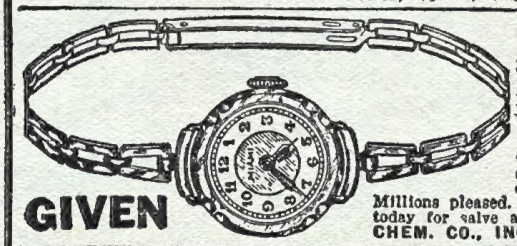
BOTH GIVEN

or Cash Commission, Nothing to Buy, No Risk—No Cash—Send No Money—Send Name—Mail Coupon—Boys! Girls!

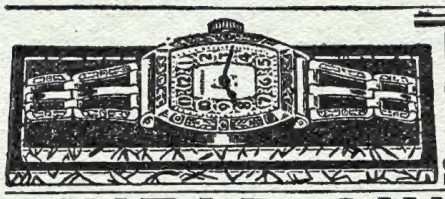
ELECTRIC PROJECTOR — 200 foot film capacity—all steel, wrinkle finish and nickel trim. 110 volt motor. AC Current-Motor rewind. Tilting device. Adjustable lamp socket. Special bulb, built in condenser. Shows good size picture. It's a whiz. LADIES! GIRLS! Charming Wrist Watch about size of dime—Dainty—Attractive—Beautiful EITHER Movie or Watch YOURS for SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE beautiful pictures with our famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE used for CHAPS, BURNS, SORES, etc., which you easily sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) and remitting as explained in premium catalog. SPECIAL: Catalog of 100 premiums shows over 20 premiums for returning only $3 collected. Salve sold most every home. Millions pleased. BE FIRST. Customers waiting. Write today for salve and pictures sent postage paid. WILSON CHEM. CO., INC., Dept. DA-87, TYRONE, PA.



PREMIUMS OR CASH FOR ALL



GIVEN



BOTH GIVEN

GIVEN! Send No Money!

Or Big Cash Commission—Nothing to Buy—No Risk—Send No Money—Send Name—Mail Coupon—BOYS! 22 Cal. Bolt Action self-cocking Safety Iver Johnson RIFLE, 22 inches long. LADIES GIRLS! Beautiful, sturdy, American made WRIST WATCH of neat size EITHER Rifle or Watch YOURS for SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE big colored pictures with our famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE used for CHAPS, BURNS, SORES, etc., which you easily sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) remit as per premium catalog. Wilson Chem. Co., Inc., Dept. DA-87, Tyrone, Pa.

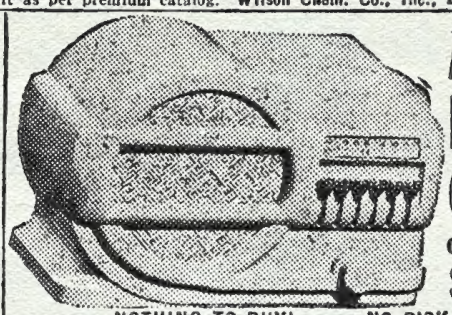
GUITAR GIVEN

Or Big Cash Commission
Send No Money
Boys! Girls!

Full Size
Nothing To Buy

Standard size regulation guitar. Regulated—fretted ebonized finger-board-pearl position dots. A MARVEL. Yours for SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE beautifully colored art pictures (correct size for framing) with our WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE used for burns, cuts, chaps, sores, etc., which you sell to friends and neighbors at 25c a box (giving picture Free) and remitting as explained in premium catalog. SPECIAL—Choice of twenty premiums for returning only $3.00 collected. (44th yr.) Be first. Send today —We trust you. Mail coupon.

WILSON CHEM. CO., INC. Dept. DA-87, TYRONE, PENNSYLVANIA



AMAZING RADIO GIVEN

OR BIG CASH COMMISSION
SEND NO MONEY

NOTHING TO BUY! NO RISK — NO CASH

Send Name and Address

Automatic tuning — Superheterodyne — AC-DC — No aerial or ground needed. Dynamic speaker. Tunes American broadcasts. Built-in antenna—five tubes. 6 position tuner plus regular tuning knob. Amazing! Yours for SIMPLY GIVING AWAY FREE beautifully colored art pictures with our WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE used for burns, cuts, chaps, sores, etc., which you sell to friends and neighbors at 25c a box, (giving picture FREE) and remitting as explained in premium catalog. SPECIAL—Choice of 20 premiums for returning only $3 collected. BE FIRST. SEND TODAY—WE TRUST YOU. MAIL COUPON NOW! — WILSON CHEM. CO., INC. DEPT. DA-87, TYRONE, PENNA.

MAIL COUPON NOW

WILSON CHEM. CO., INC.

DEPT. DA-87, Tyrone, Pa. Date.....

Gentlemen: Please send me 12 beautiful art pictures with 12 boxes WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE to sell at 25c a box (giving picture FREE). I will remit within 30 days, select a premium or keep cash commission as per new premium plan catalog sent with order, postage paid.

Name.....

RD..... Bx..... St.....

Town..... State.....

Print Your Last Name Only in Space Below.

WRITE, or PASTE COUPON on a POSTAL CARD or MAIL COUPON in an envelope TODAY!

You Ask Me What I Am Doing?

I Am Getting Ready to Earn More Money . . . Preparing for a Bigger Job

I am a student of the American School, Chicago. A little more than half way through my course—already my increased knowledge has brought me promotion as a result of the hour or so a day I have been spending getting acquainted with the principles of the work I enjoy. I use only part of my spare time, so it doesn't interfere with my home and social life, and certainly helps me on the job.

I have been surprised at the practical manner in which even advanced work is explained. It is a lot easier than I had expected. I only wish I had started this plan of getting ahead a few years earlier. But when I was 18 to 20 I felt pretty sure of myself. I didn't take enough stock in what more experienced people told me about the importance of being thoroughly trained for the job I wanted.

You Can't Win If You Don't Try

American School, Dept. G-86, Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago

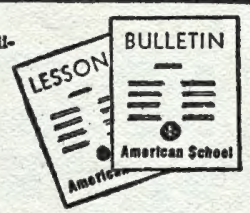
CUT ALONG THIS LINE

Try a Lesson Yourself—No Obligation

American School, Dept. G-86, Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago

I have checked the line of work in which I would like a good job. Please send me without expense or obligation on my part a copy of your Bulletin and an early lesson in the field I have selected.

- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Automotive Engineering
- ☐ Automobile Repairing
- ☐ Bookkeeping and Cost Accounting
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Contracting, Building
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Diesel Engineering
- ☐ Drafting and Designing
- ☐ Electric Refrigeration
- ☐ Heating, Ventilating, Plumbing
- ☐ Professional Accounting Incl. C. P. A. Coaching
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Law
- ☐ Liberal Arts (College)
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Merchandising
- ☐ Private Secretary
- ☐ Radio and Television
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Shop Practice
- ☐ Steam Engineering



*Name*_____ *Age*_____ *Occupation*_____

*Street*_____ *City*_____ *State*_____

"All right," the renegade rasped. "If you shoot at me, you'll get her first."

Gun Orphan of

ORANGE streaks of gunflame stabbed out through the darkness cloaking the Rafter N houses and corrals. The deafening echoes of the ruckus increased as the battle became more determined, more fierce. But it was a losing fight for old Tully Moore and his young son, Danny, making their desperate stand there in the smoke-choked living room. They couldn't stand off that gang of killers forever, and old Tully knew it was but a matter of time now before they closed in.

Twelve year old Danny crouched in the deeper shadows of the long, rambling

A HEART-APPEALING NOVELET OF A KID BANDIT'S STRUGGLE

the Owlhoot

by ED EARL REPP

She was the girl he had dreamed about during all those bitter owlhoot years. . . . yet a soul-crushing secret made Danny Moore buckle on vengeance-starved sixes—to blast her into a living man-made hell!

TO FREE HIMSELF FROM A MAN-BREAKER'S ENSLAVING YOKE!

house, handing cartridges to his dad as he called for them. His blue eyes were wide with terror as he waited hopefully for some twist of fate to save them from the inevitable. And now the clatter of hoofs lifted out of the night and old Tully pumped lead faster. Danny could see riders swinging about the house, firing as they went. Occasionally one threw up his hands and slid from his saddle, grim evidence of the oldster's markmanship. But it could not last.

Then Danny became aware that his father's gun was silent. The oldster lay inert beneath the window, a sticky pool spreading out beneath his head. A scream clogged the youngster's parched throat as he scampered to his dad's side. And as he knelt down he listened. The shooting had ceased and he heard the clatter of hoofs as the riders mysteriously lit out.

A surge of fury stabbed through him and his small fists clenched into tight balls. But sight of his parent flooded him with emotion.

Tully Moore lay face down in a grotesque position beneath the window from which he had been firing. His rifle lay a few feet away as if it had been flung by one of the outstretched arms. Danny choked back a sob. Tears started streaming down his freckled face as he knelt beside his dead sire. Then suddenly he buried his head on the inert form and wept bitterly.

How long he lay this way Danny did not know. It seemed hours but it could not have been actually over a few minutes. When finally he arose, his eyes were dry but red-rimmed from crying. Dark hatred showed in his childish features as he looked around and saw several of the bodies of the attackers strewn over the yeard. Now with a curse he stalked over and kicked savagely at one of the dead men. He turned again to the still form of Tully Moore. His voice was throaty and harsh as he spoke.

"They didn't give yuh much of a chance, Dad," he grated. "But I reckon some day I'll even the score for yuh." And he went outside to cry a little more.

So great was Danny's grief that he did not hear the muffled sound of approaching horses. When the riders were almost upon him he caught a glimpse of them. He grabbed his father's gun and whirled to face the intruders. A heavy voice arrested him.

"Don't make a play for it, kid."

AS DANNY came into full view of the men he found himself looking into the muzzle of a leveled revolver. He shook a little and lowered his own gun. He could see that the man covering him was large and beefy jowled. He counted four other riders and though Danny could not tell, it seemed that hard eyes were boring into him.

"You killed him," Danny charged savagely. "Damn you for the dirty skunks yuh are. You killed him!"

The big man chuckled harshly. "I reckon you're wrong, younker," he said. "We didn't kill him. Take a look at this. We found it in the yard."

The man lit down and handed Danny a soft object. As he took it into his hand he saw that it was a bullet shattered range hat. He examined it carefully. It was of dark grey felt and showed signs of much wear. It was covered with fine dust and it carried a hoofprint where one of the retreating horses had stomped it. After Danny had looked the hat over carefully he raised his eyes.

"What's this got tuh do with it?" he asked quizzically.

"Take a look inside," said the man.

He lit a match and Danny examined the inside of the hat in the flickering glow. Suddenly his eyes went cold. There on the sweat band a name was inscribed in faded gold lettering. Slowly he spelled out the letters: Amos Whitcomb.

"Where did yuh find this?" he bit out fiercely.

"I told yuh in the yard," said the man, his tone edged. "One uh them fellers must have dropped it."

Amos Whitcomb! An audible gasp escaped from Danny's lips. It seemed incredible that the owner of the neighboring Diamond K spread could have been with that gang of cut-throats. Tully Moore and Amos Whitcomb had settled in Wyoming years before Danny was born. They had homesteaded two sections of Whitewater Basin and from those two sections had grown the biggest ranches in the basin. Danny had been as much at home at the Diamond K as he had at the Rafter N. Amos Whitcomb's daughter, Mary, had been like a sister to him, and Mrs. Whitcomb had been the only mother he had ever known as his own mother had died when he was born.

There had been a little dispute lately between Amos Whitcomb and Tully Moore over the matter of a boundary line but it

hadn't appeared to be serious. Then Danny remembered grimly that in the past few months cattle had been mysteriously disappearing from the Rafter N. Things suddenly showed up in a clearer light and the whole rotten business tied in together.

With a pang of remorse, Danny thought of Mary Whitcomb. Often in his childish fancies he had told himself that he would some day marry Amos Whitcomb's auburn-haired daughter but in his resignation to the fate that claimed him he knew that any such ideas were suddenly swept away. An all-consuming hatred for the Diamond K owner surged through him. He vowed solemnly that some day he would return on equal terms with Amos Whitcomb and then . . . the score would be even.

The big man's voice jarred him from his grim meditation. "Do yuh know this feller Whitcomb?"

"No," snapped Danny.

"Yuh look like you're pretty much on your own now, kid," the man went on. "If yuh want to you can throw in with us. We're located up on the head of Whitewater. Me, I'm Sedge Borkman." He introduced the other men in turn. "This is Trigger Sprague, Pete Banter, Nig Molton an' this here halfbreed we call Mike. He don't know his own name himself."

Danny remained hard-eyed and sullen as Sedge Borkman spoke and as he turned to each of the men a shudder ran through his viens. Then without a word he started toward the tool shed. Borkman regarded him suspiciously. "Where yuh goin'?" he growled.

"I'm goin' tuh bury him," said Danny flatly.

"Hell, kid," said Borkman. "There ain't no use in that. He's dead."

Danny whirled and spoke savagely. "I told yuh I was goin' tuh bury him. Anybody got any objections?"

Sedge Borkman shrugged and winked at his men. "Okay, kid, if that's the way yuh feel. We just wanted tuh be travelin', that's all."

As Danny turned to go on his way he caught a glimpse of Sedge Borkman moving toward the house. He suddenly remembered that somewhere old Tully Moore had gold hidden. "What yuh goin' to do?" he accosted Borkman.

"Just lookin' around," said Borkman.

"Well, yuh can stop lookin'," snapped the boy.

"Hell on the hoof, ain't yuh?" grinned Sedge Borkman. "Yuh ought to make a first rate wild cat some day, Kid. If some jasper don't take your taw before then."

Borkman cast an evil smile at his followers and Danny did not see Halfbreed Mike coyote back into the shadows and make toward the house.

AT THE tool shed Danny found a shovel and went about the task of burying his father. When he finished he stood silently for several minutes over the fresh mound of earth. Then with a heavy tread he moved away.

At the corral he caught his roan pony and saddled him. He had decided to ride with Sedge Borkman and his gang. He didn't like or trust any of them and they were patently a hard-bitten crew. But Danny had a desire to ride with hard men and become one of them himself. And he was certain that Sedge Borkman could teach him all of the tricks of the trade.

He packed his meager belongings at the house and found the range hat that belonged to Amos Whitcomb. He jammed it on his head and the hat fell down over his ears. He resolved to keep it as a reminder of a debt that he would some day repay.

When he was finished packing Borkman and his men were ready for him. They all mounted and at a signal from the leader they galloped out of the ranch yard. Danny's throat was tight as he cast one final look back at the ranch buildings before they disappeared from view.

The first grey streaks of dawn lighted the eastern horizon when the cavalcade climbed into the maze of canyons at the upper end of the basin on the headwaters of the Whitewater River. The grassland and the sagebrush flats gave way to scattered patches of scrub pine and quaking aspen. The crisp air of early morning bit through Danny's thin clothing but he paid no heed to the cold. When the sun had climbed over the hills they pushed into a hidden canyon and about a half-mile further on several small cabins hove into view.

Danny could see signs of life about the cabins. Smoke curled from the chimneys and the tempting aroma of cooking breakfast filled the morning air. The smell gnawed at Danny's empty stomach and he suddenly remembered that he was ravenously hungry.

As they neared the cabins other men came out to meet them. They cast hard

looks at the boy and he saw that they were all of the same caliber as those with which he rode. The fact that they were cold-eyed, swaggering gunmen was plainly marked by the presence of a low tied six-shooter at every hip.

"This is it, Kid," said Sedge Borkman as he stopped and dismounted. "How would yuh like tuh take on a little grub?"

A feeling of fear and apprehension had gripped Danny from the time they first entered the canyon and glimpsed the cabins. But now the promise of food made him forget all else.

CHAPTER II

SPAWN OF VENGEANCE

IT DID not take Danny Moore many days at Sedge Borkman's camp to discover them for what they were. Outlaws and cattle rustlers. He lay awake at night listening to them ride away and then he would hear them return before daylight and the next day there would be activity in the corrals with the running iron.

The thought terrified him at first and then it began to appeal to his recently twisted sense of justice. Life had dealt harshly with him, he thought, and he seemed generally bitter toward society. Still, he was hesitant about throwing in with the gang. Even in his child mind he could see that the owlhoot trail was a long and hard one and could only end in one place . . . boothill.

He never went with them on raids, but stayed and did odd jobs around the camp. One day he sneaked away from the hideout and rode back to the Rafter N with the hopes of finding his father's stolen money. He searched high and low around the house but he could find nothing. Then the idea came to him. Amos Whitcomb had not stopped at murdering his father. He had robbed him besides. As he passed the low mound that marked Tully Moore's resting place a renewed desire for vengeance rushed through him.

He rode back to the outlaw rendezvous and the next day he was at the corrals watching them brand the stolen stock. Suddenly his eyes fell on the brands of some of the steers. It was the Diamond K. A sudden feeling of ruthless joy rushed through his veins. Amos Whitcomb was suffering at the hands of the raiders. Here was a chance for revenge. The die was cast. He would ride with Sedge Borkman's band of renegades.

The years passed. Danny Moore had become a full-fledged member of the rustler's crew. He was no longer recognizable as the skinny boy who had ridden away from the Rafter N. Time had added muscle and height and in spite of his extreme youth he had taken on as formidable appearance as any of the crew. His face was hard for that of a boy and his pale eyes carried the glint of chilled steel. He became an expert with a running iron, and long hours of practice developed a fast and deadly draw. His name, too, had been cast away and he was known only as the Kid.

He rode with the gang on the rustling raids and they wandered far from Whitewater Basin. Sedge Borkman was expanding and cattle poured into the hidden canyon to be branded and driven on over the pass to be sold to unscrupulous buyers who paid for them and asked no questions. But always the Kid felt a fiendish delight when a raid was made on the Diamond K.

Rewards were offered for the raiders and posses were sent out after them, but they could never find the trail to the hideout.

Little by little, the raids on the Diamond K became less fruitless. The Kid knew that the great herds of Amos Whitcomb were dwindling and that his huge reserve that he had built up in the past years was nearly spent. He felt a fierce satisfaction. The Diamond K owner was suffering as he had made Danny Moore suffer. Gradually, he put Mary Whitcomb out of his mind and as he became more calloused the memory faded.

Then one night a raid on Amos Whitcomb's spread failed to bring back a single head. The next day the Kid rode down there in broad daylight. A scene of ruin greeted him. Corral gates sagged open and the ranch was totally devoid of stock. The windows of the house were boarded up and the whole place reflected emptiness. The loneliness fell about him and he felt a little bit sick. Amos Whitcomb was ruined. The Kid grinned, but the grin was a mirthless one. He told himself that at least he had his revenge and although the thought was without conviction, he forced himself to believe it. As he rode back to the outlaw hideout he couldn't bring himself to the satisfaction that he had anticipated all of these years.

TIME went on. Two years rolled by and it found the Kid still riding the long trails. He found himself apart from the rest of his fellows now. He seldom took part in their gatherings and when he sat in council it was for his own good or at the order of Sedge Borkman. From time to time the other outlaws eyed him suspiciously and the Kid knew that they didn't trust him, but they never crossed him. They knew of his gunswift and they gave him a wide berth.

Sedge Borkman's owlhooters became more hard pressed. Vigilante committees were organized and bigger rewards were offered for their capture. And as the danger of capture became more acute the raiding fell off. Several times one of the outlaws failed to return after a raid. Nothing was said, but each man knew that some posseman or vigilante had raked in part of the reward money.

It was one evening about sunset that there was a loud flutter of hoofs down the canyon and they all hurried out to see a rider coming wildly up the trail. Even from the distance they could see that he was hanging grimly to the saddle horn to keep from tumbling from the horse's back. As he neared them they could see his wht, drawn face.

"It's Nig Molton," someone shouted. "He's shot tuh pieces."

The horse raced into the clearing between the cabins and came to a stop of his own accord. The wounded renegade rolled from the saddle and crumpled on the ground. Sedge Borkman hurried over to the fallen man and raised his head up into his arms. Nig Molton half opened his eyes.

"What happened to yuh?" asked the big outlaw leader quickly.

"A gang jumped me down in the basin," Molton responded weakly. "They got me, but—but I had tuh git back. They—" he faltered but managed to finish out. "They got on the trail an' they're comin' here."

Sedge Borkman shot up to his full height and let Nig Molton drop heavily to the ground. The Kid saw the wounded man's head snap back and his eyes rolled once and he was still. Nig Molton was dead.

"Git ready tuh ride," Sedge Borkman shouted out his orders. "The posse's on our tail. We can make it over the pass and get away."

There was great activity around the corrals and buildings of the hideout. Men hastily caught their horses from the remuda and saddled them. Guns were loaded and food and ammunition was jammed into the saddlebags. Nobody carried a bit more than he would need, for the necessity of traveling light was urgent. When they were ready Borkman gave the signal.

"Ready, boys?" he shouted. "Let's be foggin'."

The Kid made no move to mount his horse. He just stood with his blue eyes boring into the outlaw leader. Sedge Borkman saw it and clipped out impatiently. "Hit leather, you fool. We ain't got much time."

"Ain't you forgettin' something, Borkman?" said the Kid slowly.

"What do yuh mean?" snapped Borkman.

"Are yuh aimin' tuh leave Nig here for the buzzards tuh pick clean?" asked the Kid.

"Hell with Nig!" ground out the big renegade. "We can't help him none. We gotta look out for ourselves."

"He was man enough tuh ride in an' warn us when he knew he was dyin'," rasped the Kid. "The least we can do is tuh bury him decent."

It was the outlaw Trigger Sprague who stepped up now and faced Sedge Borkman. He eyed the man levelly. "Yeah, Sedge," he said. "The Kid's right. We ain't gonna leave Nig here for the coyotes."

"Maybe yuh forget, you fellers, that I'm givin' orders in this outfit," said Sedge Borkman evilly.

"This time I'm givin' 'em, Borkman," said the Kid low and deadly.

The fierce eyes of the renegade leader locked for a moment with the dead blue ones of the Kid. Then he turned to his men. "All right," he shot out. "Git a shovel some of yuh an' git tuh work buryin' Nig. An' hurry it up."

The work of burying the dead renegade was finished and rocks were placed over the grave to protect it from coyotes. Then the others swung into the saddles and Sedge Borkman led out in a gallop toward the low pass at the head of the hidden canyon.

They rode long and hard, stretching their horses to the utmost. They hid out during the day and got what little rest they could and when the first shadows of evening stole across the hills they were in the saddle again.

The Kid rode sullenly apart from the rest of the gang now. The difference at the outlaw hideout had caused an open break between him and Sedge Borkman and he realized for the first time how much he

hated the big renegade leader. Constantly in his mind was the picture of the ruined Diamond K spread. The Kid held no pity for Amos Whitcomb, but he was range-bred and the thought of a once-flourishing ranch laid waste troubled him beyond words.

SEVERAL days later the band of renegades crossed the state line and dropped down into Idaho. They were a trail-weary and ragged crew. The days of hard riding told heavily on them. But now they rode less cautiously. They had put a great deal of distance between themselves and Whitewater Basin and with each day they felt less the danger of pursuit.

The deep shadows of evening were descending now as they rode along a wide plateau close into the timber that fringed the foothills of the higher mountains. The peacefulness and the tranquility of the country made them jog along listlessly. They were prepared for nothing out of the ordinary when a harsh voice broke out over the gloom.

"Hold it, gents," it grated. "Stop where yuh are."

The curt command brought each one to an abrupt halt as he reined his horse savagely. They stood immobile for long seconds. Then they heard the strident shout of Sedge Borkman.

"We're trapped!" he cried. "Make a run for it. That's our only chance. We'll meet up some place."

A blue pencil of flame streaked out from his gun as he roweled his pony and they charged forward. The shot was answered by others and the place was suddenly a bedlam. There was a scream of terror as some of the bullets found their marks. Horses and riders were dashing madly back and forth to escape the deadly hail of leaden bullets.

The Kid leaned forward in his saddle and made a wild rush for a small clearing in the trees. His gun spoke savagely in the dash for safety. Then suddenly he heard the shooting behind him and he knew that he had escaped the gauntlet of gunfire. The echoes of the shooting died away as the Kid goaded the pony forward and they bored recklessly into the darkness along the rolling terrain of the valley. They raced down into gulleys, up the other side until it seemed that it had been hours since that short but fierce gunfight there in the edge of the timber.

Then as the Kid started to slacken off his speed and give the pony his head the animal lurched forward. The Kid felt himself falling and then suddenly he hit the ground with a sickening thud. It seemed that a million fire devils were shooting through his reeling brain. Gradually the reeling stopped and a heavy blackness claimed him.

CHAPTER III

RELEASE FROM HATE

WHEN the Kid returned to his senses he believed at first that he had awakened from a wild nightmare. Slowly he pieced the happenings together and he decided that the things he had been dreaming had really happened.

He looked about him. It was daylight and the sun was shining brightly. The bright, fiery ball had not climbed far into the heavens, so he knew that it was early morning. He was sitting in the bottom of a little swale, and lush grass was high and green all around him. A few hundred feet away a small stream trickled mirthfully along its winding course.

The Kid sat up and rubbed his head where he had fallen from the horse. There was a lump there and it was pretty sore. He was stiff and aching slightly from the fall, but otherwise he was all right.

Now he lay back on his elbow and took in the peaceful scene that surrounded him. He looked up and saw fleecy clouds floating listlessly in the serene blue of the broad canopy that stretched from one horizon to the other. Somewhere a meadow lark sang gaily as if to offer him a cheerful morning greeting.

Suddenly a feeling of loneliness and emptiness fell over him. He realized in that moment that he was sick of the life he had been leading. He realized that he had been sick of it for years, but he was driven on by the roweling desire for vengeance. Now his vengeance was partly fulfilled and the rest seemed far removed from this place. So far, in fact, that perhaps he could drive it from his mind forever. He knew that he hated Sedge Borkman and his whole slimy crew, with perhaps the exception of one man. Trigger Sprague had stood by him that last day in the hideout in the hidden canyon. The Kid could figure no motive for the renegade's action except that maybe Trigger had a speck more decency in his makeup than the others. The others,

including Borkman, were patently afraid of him and tolerated him only because of his prowess with a six-gun.

Now as he lay here on the green meadow a sudden desire for peace came over him. He wanted to settle down and forget the past. He could take up his name that he had cast away years ago. Danny Moore. He was in a new country and he could start with a clean slate. He had been known during his outlaw career only as the Kid, and very few had actually seen him. Perhaps none but members of the gang could positively identify him. He had to chance that and if they came back trying to lure him to the old life . . . he still had his forty-five.

He spent most of the morning looking over the land in the little glen. He located landmarks and surveyed as best he could the patch of ground. An idea was taking place in the back of his mind.

Shortly before noon he caught his horse and started out in search of settlement. From a rancher in the valley he got the direction of the town of Red Lodge. There he filed on a section in the little valley and before evening he was headed back with a pack horse laden with the tools, food and supplies necessary for starting a homestead.

In the days that followed, Dan Moore found himself taking eagerly to his newly acquired life. From dawn to dark he worked tirelessly, and in the forge of honest labor a new man was molded. He whistled and sang at his work and gradually it seemed that the past was a vague, dreaded specter of a life he would soon forget.

For a cabin site he located a wide, level spot nestled close to the sheltering brow of a small hill. The creek flowed past the door about fifty yards away. On the other side of the stream he visualized other ranch buildings and corrals filled with stock. Some day there would be herds of cattle, they would be Rafter N cattle, grazing on the benchland that led back to the timber. Down in the creek bottom was wild hay that would provide ample winter feeding.

The fringe of pine forest that bordered the foothills of the higher mountains extended down onto Dan's section and soon his axe could be heard ringing as he felled the tall lodgepole pines for the start of his new home. With his pony he snaked the logs to the cabin site and there he cut and notched them.

Three weeks found the cabin up to the ridge logs. For a roof he split thin, straight saplings and daubed the cracks with alkali, then covered the whole thing with dirt. In another week he moved his possessions into the single room. A wild feeling of pride and joy rushed through him at this new sense of security and propriety. This was his home. He had built it with his own hands; carved it out of a place where nothing had been before.

IT WAS a few days later while Dan was busily engaged in his daily tasks that he happened to look up and see a rider coming toward him. A sudden feeling of apprehension struck him and for the first time since he had settled on his homestead, his mind flashed back to the deeds of his past. He could not recognize the horseman from the distance. The thought plagued him that it might be somebody who had known him before. With a cool deliberation he stalked into the house and strapped on his gun belt. He went outside and waited.

Presently the rider came into closer view and Dan came up with a start. It was a girl. A few moments later she reined at his side.

"Good morning," she called cheerily.

Now Dan took notice of her. She was neatly clad in a pair of blue levis and a white shirt which, although it fitted loosely, did not hide the fullness of her bosom. She had brown eyes, light auburn hair and her lips were delicately curved. A quick yearning tore at Dan's heart. In his short and stormy life women had been very much out of place. He had seen very few since he was a small boy. He found his mind dwelling on some vague, intangible thing that he had missed in his association with the hard men of his kind. He longed for the companionship he had been denied.

"Howdy, ma'am," he drawled slowly. "I didn't expect a caller so early in the morning."

"I was out riding," the girl replied. "And I saw that somebody was building up here in the gulch." She let her eyes stray around to the buildings. "My," she breathed. "You certainly have made progress. And such a lovely spot, too."

"Ain't much yet," said Dan, swelling with pride. "But there'll be a lot more here some day."

She dismounted and Dan showed her the cabin and his work on the unfinished outbuildings and corrals. All the while he painted the picture of the ranch as it existed

in his mind's eye and the way that he hoped it would some day be in reality.

He found the girl a ready listener. She showed a genuine interest in his work and in his plans for the future and from time to time gave suggestions of her own. It was with reluctance that he accepted her statement that she must go. When he took her hand in parting a sudden thrill shot through him that he could not account for.

"I've enjoyed the visit so much," she told him. "It is always inspiring to see somebody creating something as you're doing here."

"It's meant a lot to me," Dan said slowly. "I've just realized how lonesome a man can be. You'll come again?"

"I will," she smiled. "I promise. Goodbye."

She turned and the horse led off down the trail at an easy gallop. Dan marveled at the grace and bearing of the girl in the saddle. She was range-bred, he knew, by the way she handled the horse. When she disappeared around the point of the hill he found the loneliness more oppressive than ever.

He went back to his work but he could not put hs mind to it. His thoughts kept turning back to the recent visit. He told himself that he was a fool, that she probably wouldn't come back again and all the while he was hoping fervently that she would. Gradually he was forced to admit, that even from that short acquaintance, he was falling in love with the slim, auburn-haired girl.

CHAPTER IV

THE LONG TRAIL BECKONS

SHE did come back, two days later. This time as Dan watched her come into view, he felt his heart pounding heavily. When she dismounted and smiled in greeting he thought that she was infinitely more beautiful than she had been the first time.

They talked and laughed gaily. Dan felt a happiness that he could never remember having had. The girl complimented him on the progress he had made since her last visit, though in reality it had been very little.

Dan asked her to stay for dinner, explaining that it wasn't much and what he had was very crude, but she was welcome to share it. She accepted the invitation eagerly. "I'll help you," she said when Dan asked her to stay.

She rolled up her sleeves and Dan was amazed at the dexterity with which she worked. She made biscuits in the dutch oven and soon the tempting aroma of bacon and coffee permeated the atmosphere of the one-room cabin.

Dan ate heartily of the meal and when he had finished he sat back and started to roll a smoke. The girl leaned forward with her chin cupped in her hands and looked at him wistfully through her brown eyes.

"You know," she began. "I've known you two whole days and you haven't told me your name yet. I meant to ask you before but somehow I just didn't get around to it."

The abruptness of the question startled Dan and he spilt a little bit of the tobacco from the paper. Then he remembered that the name Dan Moore had never been associated with any of his darkened past. He smiled faintly. "It's Dan Moore," he told her.

The girl's eyes widened a little bit and Dan noticed it. "What's the matter?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, it's nothing," she replied. "It's just that the name made me remember something. I used to know a little boy by the name of Danny Moore. But that was years ago back in Wyoming. But there's nothing really startling in it. I have no doubt there's lots of people by that name."

Dan lowered the half-rolled cigarette and this time all of the tobacco slid to the floor. He hunched forward and his brows lowered a little.

"What is your name?" he asked slowly.

"I'm Mary Whitcomb," she answered, puzzled. "Why do you ask it in that way?"

The name struck like a thunderbolt in Dan's brain. Instinctively his eyes shot to a shelf in the far corner of the room. On the shelf lay a battered Stetson that he had discarded in hopes that it would let him forget something that he had once sworn never to forget. Now it all came back to him. Here was Amos Whitcomb's daughter sitting across the table from him and Whitcomb himself was undeniably close at hand.

In that split second he lived again the horrible night at the Rafter N in Whitewater Basin. He was little Danny Moore stealing out to see old Tully Moore shot to death and lying in a grotesque heap. His vow of vengeance flared anew. The

hand of destiny had led him to Amos Whitcomb.

Mary saw the transition on his features but she could not read their meaning. "You're Danny Moore?" she faltered, her eyes wide.

"Yes," Dan said simply.

"Where have you been all these years?" she asked quickly. "We've wondered many times about you." She stopped a moment, then continued. "We saw what happened, and we tried to find you. Why didn't you come and live with us?"

"I just figgered I wanted tuh quit the country," Dan lied. "An' what about you, how did you get here?"

"We came here about two years ago," she said. Tears came into her eyes as she went on and told Dan about the hard times they had at the ranch. She told him of the rustling raids and how her father had used every cent he had to try to hang on and how he was finally forced to quit.

"It was heart-breaking," she half sobbed. "To watch him give everything to try to save the ranch and all of the time he knew it was a losing fight. He was so crushed, so whipped when he finally had to turn the place over to the bank. Then we came to Idaho to try to start over again. He's done well, but the failure took something out of him." She now looked away from Dan. Her fists were clenched and her eyes sparkled with hate. "If I were only a man," she gritted. "I would hunt those dirty thieves down if it took me the rest of my days." Her head fell into her arms and her shoulders shook with sobs.

A bitter wave of self-condemnation swept over Dan Moore. He hated himself at that moment for having been one of the forces that ruined this girl's father. In reaping his vengeance he had caused her to suffer, but then Amos Whitcomb had caused him to suffer equally as much. He had swept away everything that was dear to Danny Moore and left only grief and hatred.

Mary Whitcomb looked up once more. She had stopped crying and was more composed. She forced a smile through her tears. "I'm sorry I acted so," she said. "But I was upset. You understand, don't you?"

"It's all right," Dan mumbled. "I know how yuh feel."

"I really must go now," said Mary. "It's been good finding you again after all these years. Dad and Mother will be happy to hear it, too. They've wondered so much about you. Please come and see us. We live about five miles down in the valley on the road to Red Lodge."

"I will," said Dan Moore stiffly and he knew that there was only one thing that could ever bring him to see Amos Whitcomb.

AFTER she left Dan was thrown into a cross current of torn and conflicting emotions. He knew when he saw Mary disappear down the trail that she had ridden out of his life forever. Regardless of whether he loved her she was the daughter of the man he hated. The man he had sworn, beside the body of his dead sire, to kill.

That Amos Whitcomb had been the one that murdered his father, he was certain. The finding of the hat that night had stamped the idea indelibly in his child mind. The idea had grown with the years until it had become of such magnitude that it was a fact as far as he was concerned. Sane thought and logic were crowded out, leaving only one bitter belief. Amos Whitcomb had killed Tully Moore!

All night long Dan tossed fitfully, restless with troubled dreams. When the early hours of morning came he had set on a hard, relentless plan. He would go to Amos Whitcomb's ranch and force a showdown with him. Then he would ride out of the country. Where he would go he didn't know. Pehaps he would find Sedge Borkman and seek once more the dim trails of the owlhoot. In the eyes of the law he would be a murderer, but in his own he would be living by the principle that those who lived by violence must also die by violence.

His plans for settling down as a peace-loving cattleman were all swept away in one cruel stroke. The little cabin and the other buildings that he had put up in such a spirit of gaiety would fall into decadence and ruin. The short time spent on his homestead would be only a brief interlude in the life of one who was never destined to know the feeling of security and happiness.

With the coming of daylight Dan arose, but somehow he didn't start on his plan of vengeance. He told himself that he wasn't quite ready, that he would wait a while. He went on about his work around the ranch. It was a half-hearted effort and he didn't sing and whistle now. His features were a cold, emotionless mask.

Shortly before noon he was suddenly drawn away from his work by the sound

of approaching hoofbeats. He came up with a start. His first thought was that it was Mary Whitcomb come to visit him again. But when he saw the rider he knew that it wasn't her. It was a man. He puzzled at who it might be until the man had come into close view. Then suddenly, although Dan hadn't seen him for years, he knew that it was Amos Whitcomb.

The years of hardship had told on Amos Whitcomb. His hair was gray and his shoulders were a little bit stooped. His face was more wrinkled and his long mustache was uneven but he still carried his head high with a proud bearing and in his light blue eyes there still burned a fierce determination. He rode up to Dan and called a greeting and Dan grunted in return.

"My daughter tells me you're Danny Moore, son," he said. "It's been a long time since we last met."

He lit down and extended a gnarled hand to the younger man. Dan took it and cursed himself for a hypocrite. But he noticed that the clasp was still firm.

"That's right," Dan said curtly. "I am Danny Moore."

"Yuh don't know how happy we all are tuh see you, boy," said Amos Whitcomb. "We wondered where yuh went after—well, after what happened. If yuh'd only come to stay with us. Yuh was like our own son."

"I didn't want none uh your hospitality, Whitcomb," Dan said savagely.

"I know yuh wanted tuh get away and forget, Danny," replied the old man. "That was your privilege. But it must've been hard sleddin' at times."

DAN fought back the impulse to throw himself at Amos Whitcomb and choke the truth from him but he couldn't do it. The rancher was unarmed and he wasn't near a match for Dan physically.

Amos Whitcomb went on. "I'm glad tuh see you're gettin' on so well here, boy," he said. "It's gonna be good havin' yuh for a neighbor. An' come down tuh our ranch often. We want yuh to."

They talked on and all of Dan's answers to the rancher's questions were short and blunt. Amos Whitcomb attributed Dan's bluntness to a bitterness that could only be erased with years. In parting he said, "When yuh git stock here, younker, watch 'em. We've had a little rustling trouble lately. I went through one siege of 'em an' it ain't nice. I'll tell yuh that."

At the mention of rustlers Dan instantly knew the answer. Sedge Borkman and his crew were riding again. Well, Dan could take care of them if they bothered him and if they bothered Whitcomb to hell with him, that was his lookout. Then he thought of Mary. If Borkman went so far as to harm her Dan would settle the score with him.

In the mental turmoil that gripped Dan as he watched the old man ride away, he was downright certain of one thing. He was going to have one hell of a time bringing himself to kill Amos Whitcomb.

Throughout the day Dan's thoughts plagued and tortured him. He made plans and rejected them. He alternately called himself a fool and a yellow bellied coward. Several times he started to the Whitcomb ranch and then changed his mind. At nightfall he had decided definitely to ride in and have the truth out of the old man. He caught his horse, strapped on his guns and hit the trail.

He rode hard, urging his horse to the utmost. His face was grim and his heart felt like a leaden lump in his breast.

The lights of the Whitcomb ranch buildings flickered through the fading light when suddenly Dan's horse shied away from the trail. Dan reined up abruptly and saw a dark form huddled on the ground before him. Quickly he jumped from the horse's back and knelt beside the inert form. He lit a match and in the pale glow he recognized the face of the outlaw, Trigger Sprague.

Dan pulled the renegade's head up and cradled it in his strong arms. "Trigger," he said hoarsely.

The man opened his eyelids a little bit and stared blankly into Dan's face. Then recognition struck him. "Damn me," he said weakly. "If it ain't the Kid."

"What happened to yuh?" asked Dan.

"I guess I got my needin's," replied Trigger. "Me an' Sedge had differences. He got the best uh it. As long as he was content tuh go along with rustlin' I was willin' tuh go along. When he wanted tuh go in for out an' out robbery I balked. So here I am."

Dan was suddenly apprehensive. "Who was he goin' tuh rob?" he asked slowly.

"He's ridin' in tonight on Amos Whitcomb," said Trigger. He paused for a

moment and then went on. "I want tuh tell yuh somethin' else, Kid. Whitcomb didn't kill yore paw. Sedge Borkman did."

CHAPTER V

THE KID RIDES AGAIN

IT TOOK moments for the import of Trigger Sprague's statement to soak in. When it did it struck like a lightning bolt. "Sedge Borkman?" he echoed hollowly.

"Yeah, Sedge did it," Trigger went on. "I'm about done for, Kid. I want tuh go out with as clean a slate as I can. I wasn't always the dirty skunk that you knew. Anyway, that don't matter. Sedge planted that hat there that night. Where the hell he got it I don't know. He figured yuh for good gun material so he thought if he could git yuh to hatin' somebody bad enough he could git yuh to do most anything. He figured you bein' a kid like yuh was, yuh'd jump at the idea uh Whitcomb bein' yore paw's murderer. An' he'd keep drillin' it into yuh until yuh believed it when yuh grew up. Guess he figgered right. Yuh got a chance now tuh undo some of the wrong yuh did. Yuh can't be to blame for it but anyway Sedge an' two uh the others are gonna rob Whitcomb tonight. They heard he's got some money hid somewhere." Trigger gasped for breath but managed to get out the last few words. "I'm goin', Kid. So long an' I hope I see Sedge in hell with me in a few hours." His head rolled over and he was dead.

Dan lowered Trigger's head gently to the ground and rose up to his full height. His fists were clenched until his knuckles were white. "God!" he cried suddenly and remorsefully. "What have I done?"

Like a man in a trance he climbed into his saddle. He had wondered why he couldn't bring himself to kill Amos Whitcomb. This was it. If there was any killing to be done the former Diamond K rancher deserved to kill him. He had caused a family an infinite amount of suffering. Could he ever atone for this awful wrongdoing? He swore solemnly that there was one way of partly making up for it. That was to take the life of Sedge Borkman.

He roweled the pony savagely, not knowing what he was doing. A red film of remorse and hatred covered his eyes as he flew along the trail and the ugly face of the cruel renegade leader gyrated before his eyes.

A few minutes the shadows of the ranch buildings merged into view. All was peaceful and quiet, belying any threat of violence that hung over the place. Dan stopped and took close surveillance of all the surroundings. Then cautiously he dismounted and ground anchored his pony in a grove of cottonwoods a little way from the house. Stealthily he approached the building, coyoting into the shadows as he went.

Twenty feet from the porch he stopped and listened carefully. No sound penetrated the quiet of the night. The light was burning in the living room and the house gave signs of occupancy. Dan breathed easier. It was apparent that Borkman had not yet struck.

Dan took a step toward the lighted window and suddenly a hard object jammed into the small of his back. "That'll be far enough, my buckaroo," a voice sheared the evening quiet. Dan recognized it instantly as that of Halfbreed Mike.

He stood frozenly for a moment, then the faint spark of an idea took place in his mind. Mike had the drop on him and there was no way of geting out of it. Slowly he turned around and looked into the renegade's gimlet eyes. He feigned surprise. "Hello, Mike," he said, grinning faintly. "What's the idea uh rammin' the smoke pole in my gizzard?"

"The Kid," ejaculated Mike. "Where in hell have yuh been? Sedge has been lookin' all over for yuh. Hell, I didn't know it was you." He lowered the weapon. "I figgered—"

Dan leaped at the fleeting opportunity. His fist lashed out and caught the outlaw flush on the point of the chin. With a groan he reeled backward and fell to the ground. He was out cold.

Dan had tried to be as quiet as possible but considerable commotion was caused by the slugging of Halfbreed Mike. Suddenly the front door of the ranch house came open and a shaft of light fell out across the front porch. A figure appeared at the door. Dan knew instantly that it was Mary Whitcomb. "Who is it?" she asked, straining her eyes through the darkness.

Dan felt sudden fear for the girl lined against the light in the doorway. "Get back inside, quick," he shouted at her.

Before he had hardly finished speaking a shot rang out and a blue pencil of gunfire

leaped out at him from the shadows. Dan felt a sudden sharp burning pain where the bullet grazed him on the shoulder.

There was a scream from Mary Whitcomb and with a lightning draw Dan pulled his gun and targeted the flame from the clump of bushes. There was a sudden curse and a groan and he knew that the bullet had found its mark. He hurried over to the place where the sound came from and he saw a man sprawled out in a lifeless heap. He gave a quick glance at the man's face and saw that it was Pete Banter, one of Borkman's henchmen.

That was two of the renegades down. Halfbreed Mike would be out for some time but Sedge Borkman was still somewhere close. The outlaw leader had no doubt seen Pete Banter go down and was hiding out for a chance to get a shot at Dan. It would be a waiting game, Dan knew, with one of them trying to get the advantage of the other.

MARY stood on the porch transfixed with horror at the quick succession of events. Amos Whitcomb had appeared at the door and was now racing down the step to see what was wrong. Dan could see a movement inside the house and he knew that Mrs. Whitcomb was also coming to find out what had happened.

"Mary, go back inside," Dan repeated his order fiercely. He shouted to Amos Whitcomb to get out of the way.

Presently a shadowy figure darted up on the porch and grabbed the girl and backed away toward the outside. In the shaft of light Dan saw the ugly features of Sedge Borkman. "All right," he growled. "If yuh shoot at me you'll git her first."

Mary gave a sharp outcry and she struggled in the renengade's grasp. Dan started toward them and he saw Borkman raise his gun. In the face of certain death Dan continued. Sedge Borkman leveled the gun and took careful aim. He could afford to do so for he knew that Dan would not dare to fire at him while he had the girl as a shield.

Suddenly Mary tore an arm free from the renegade's grip. She flung it at Borkman's gun hand and at the same time the gun went off but she had spoiled his aim enough that the bullet went whining over Dan's head.

Like a springing cougar he flung himself at Sedge Borkman and the girl. At that same instant the outlaw leader threw out his arms to protect himself and Mary pulled herself away. Dan swung a fist at Borkman's gun arm and sent the weapon spinning. Now he waited in a crouch for Dan.

"So it's goin' tuh be that way, huh Kid?" he snarled. "Well come ahead. I can take yuh with fists or guns. It don't make no difference."

"You know why I'm goin' to kill yuh, don't yuh, Borkman," shot out Dan. "In case yuh don't, I saw Trigger a little while ago. He told me the whole story."

Sedge Borkman made a lunge at Dan and the younger man stepped lightly aside, at the same time he drove his knotted fist hard to Borkman's belly. Borkman doubled up momentarily but he was out of it in the same instant. He swung a wild haymaker that caught Dan on the side of the head. Dan reeled and he felt dizzy but he shook his head and bored in more savagely than before.

Now both men were in close, swinging sledge-hammer blows with reckless abandon. Dan backed away to duck one of Borkman's wild swings and as he did so his foot caught a small boulder and he tripped and fell backwards.

Borkman came at him and jumped with both feet aimed at Dan's head but Dan rolled away just in time and the impetus carried the big man to the ground. They grappled there without getting up.

Borkman caught Dan around the chest with his powerful arms and started squeezing. Dan felt that his bones would surely crack under the terrific pressure but some indomitable spirit forbade him to give in.

Mary Whitcomb, her mother and her father all stood by speechless. They all knew that this was a fight to the finish. That it wouldn't be over until one or the other was dead.

Suddenly Dan wriggled free of Borkman's grasp. He rose half up and sent another smashing blow into the renegade's face. Then his hand went out to Borkman's throat. With all his might he gripped. Borkman kicked and thrashed but Dan held on like a bulldog. His fingers began aching unmercifully but he only gripped all the harder.

Then Borkman's kicking and squirming became less violent. His tongue rolled out and his face became purple. Suddenly

there was a loud snapping noise and the renegade ceased to fight. He lay still and Dan relinquished his hold.

Dan rose up slowly, his clothes half torn off him and his face cut and bleeding. Mary moved a step toward him and then suddenly she stopped. Her eyes went wide with terror. "Danny! Look out," she gasped.

Dan whirled to see the fallen outlaw, Halfbreed Mike, levelling a gun at him. He had forgotten all about Mike in the fierce struggle with Sedge Borkman. Now Mike had the drop on him again as he had it earlier in the evening. This time Dan was unarmed. He had lost his gun in the fight. As he looked into the bore of Mike's six-gun he realized that death was only seconds away.

The reverberation of the gun echoed through the night and to Dan's amazement he saw Mike throw up his unfired weapon and plunge over into the dust. He whirled just in time to see a smoking gun in Amos Whitcomb's gnarled fist.

"I reckon that kinda makes us even, son," murmured Amos. "You saved my bacon an' I saved yours."

"I owe you two bits change," grinned Danny as Mary Whitcomb rushed toward him.

She cried: "Danny . . . you're hurt!"

"Not bad," he said and turned to his horse. "I'll be goin' now."

"No you won't, young man!" another voice sheared at him. "At least not until you've fixed yourself up some."

HE TURNED to see a small, gray-haired woman looking at him, smiling at him in motherly fashion. He guessed she was Mary's mother. And he liked her. She set up a strange longing deep within him. "Mother Whitcomb," he murmured softly.

"That's right," the old lady stepped toward him. "An' it's about time somebody took you in hand. I'm not goin' to have my boy runnin' off the first thing." And she took him by the arm. Mary closed in on him from the other side. A slow smile built on his rugged face.

"Reckon I'll be stayin'," he said, a new happiness claiming him.

He turned to Mary. Her brown eyes were smiling. He knew then that he would have come . . . just to see them again, and he resolved never to leave her. Tonight he had in some measure paid part of his great debt to them. He knew that as years rolled by he would be able to repay in full by simple faith and devotion. Amos followed them to the house, smiling.

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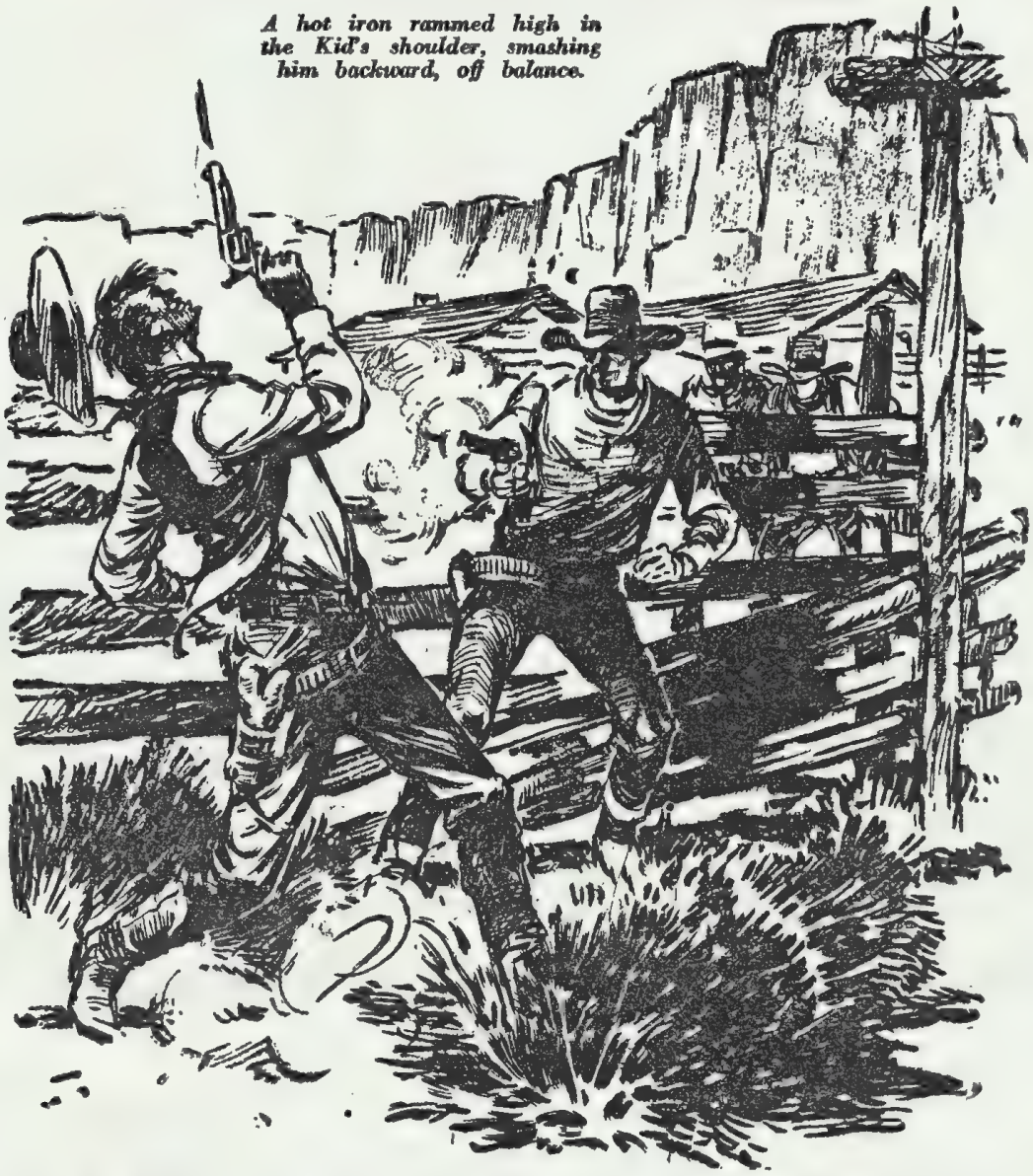

A hot iron rammed high in the Kid's shoulder, smashing him backward, off balance.

RIO COLT RIOT

by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

A renegade's scrawl on the back of that law-drilled dry-gulcher's reward dodger made Deputy Marshal Wink Dixon the honored recruit of a border scourge's gun spread . . . but the dodger itself was Dixon's boothill passport!

FOR days as he had neared the Lava Canyon country, Deputy U. S. Marshal Wink Dixon's nerves had been high-strung, thin-edged under the constant threat of danger. The little lawman was that way now, senses keened and alert, blue-gray eyes cold and restless, as he threaded his way through the thickets that

choked the narrow, rock-walled gulch.

He paused near a jutting shoulder of granite, his runty, hard-muscled young body tense, his eyes searching the gravel and sand floor of the gulch. His lips flattened into a firm, hard line, quirking at their corners into a faint grim shadow of a smile. The shapeless impression of a horse's hoofs still led down the ever deepening gulch; the tracks he had followed on foot ever since his horse had been rustled from him four nights ago.

Miles of walking over rough, uneven ground that was tangled with sage-brush and cactus had flagged the young waddy's wiry strength. His eyes were hollow, lined with weariness, but stubborn fires of rage smoldered in their blue-gray depths.

"Rustle my hoss an' steal my grub, will he?" he muttered grimly. "I'll show the dirty son. I'll bust him wide open same as I'll bust up Spur Lasson's Lava Canyon killers afore this is all over."

He started forward again, wincing slightly as he planted each booted foot in the loose gravel. Three days of walking in those tight fitting, slant-heeled boots had made his feet feel like one solid mass of blisters, and the brassy desert sun blazing down from the cloudless Texas sky only added to his torture.

He worked his way cautiously through the thickets, eyes shifting alertly ahead of him as he walked. A subtle, inborn sense of danger warned him the outlaw couldn't be far ahead; the tracks of the horse around the muddy water-hole at the mouth of the gulch hadn't yet filled with water when he had come upon them, and a vagrant breeze a few moments ago had brought the faint pungent odor of burning greasewood.

CATS-CLAW and cholla and spiked maguey raked his chapless legs with clawing thorns, as he pressed grimly forward. The gulch bent sharply to the south a few yards farther on. The short waddy worked around the shoulder of rock, then came to a tense halt. Ahead of him the thicket thinned out onto a barren, gravel-floored flats where another gulch branched into the main one. A faint waving wisp of smoke pulled his eyes to a small fire built near a jumble of rocks near the far wall of the gulch.

Wink Dixon's lips thinned, and his slight body drew into a tight crouch behind a clump of cholla. His hand slid down to the walnut-handled Colt sagging from the shell-studded belt around his lean waist, and his narrowed eyes searched out the grulla bronc half hidden behind a growth of mesquite beyond the jumble of rocks.

"Shore, that's my Tommy hoss," the little waddy muttered through clenched teeth. "But where is that rustlin' pole-cat? Reckon he seen me followin' him an' holed up some place tuh gun me down."

Then a faint movement in the rocks caught the waddy's alert eyes, the half-seen shifting of a man hunkered down behind one of the boulders. A shaft of sunlight lanced fleetingly from the barrel of a gun the crouching killer nosed out over the rock. Wink grinned coldly, muttered soft, bleak words.

"There's the murderin' son! Jest like a sidewinder, all coiled up an' ready tuh strike . . ."

Another sound, foreign to the silence of the afternoon, broke the short waddy's words short. It came from the other fork of the gulch, the dim ring of a horse's hoof on stone. Puzzled, Wink squinted through the cholla, hot blood hammering through his veins.

Then suddenly it came to him—the hidden killer wasn't waiting for him, but for another rider coming in from the other branch of the gulch. Even as the realization struck him, he saw the man ride into view, a tall, homely, lantern-jawed hombre slouching sleepily in his saddle. From the corner of his eye, the short waddy saw the killer's gun snap up, following the oncoming rider. For a brief instant, Wink Dixon was frozen by the sight of impending murder, then his hard-muscled body exploded in action. He leaped clear of the cholla, lurched forward, dragging up his gun. Strained words yelped from his drawn lips.

"Lookout, you! Gun in them rocks!"

Bra-ang!

The throbbing echoes of the killer's shot blotted out his yell of warning. He saw the tall rider jerk up in the saddle, sway weakly, then topple slowly to the ground. Then his own gun was up, hammering and jumping in his fist. He saw the killer spin around, gun whipping toward him in an ugly blue arc. Smoke spurted, pierced by a pale finger of flame. Lead fanned past the running waddy, plucked at his shirt like invisible hands.

Wink dodged wildly to one side, then jerked to a halt, snapped his gun steady.

For a gun-torn split-second the outlaw stood there, crouching behind the rocks, gun yammering. Wink's gun roared, pitched in his hand. A slug caught the killer in the chest, smashing him backward off balance. He stumbled, caught himself, then slid forward into the open on his face.

Cautiously, Wink Dixon paced forward, young face bleak and hard. He reached the side of the fallen killer, bent alertly, and turned the man over. A gasp of surprise escaped the short waddy's taut lips, as he stared at the dead man.

"Peso Mier! I wonder what that little sidewinder is doin' down here. I'll bet . . ."

He holstered his smoking gun, and fumbled through the dead outlaw's pockets. He found a dirty, crumpled envelope, pulled a smudgy letter out of it, and glanced over the crudely written words. When he looked up, his blue-gray eyes were fogged with grim lights.

"Mier was headin' down here tuh join up with Spur Lasson's killers," the short waddy muttered softly. "This letter was tuh get him past Lasson's guards, an' . . ."

The faint crunching of boots in gravel, sent the runty youth spinning wildly around. His hand slashed down to his gun, then jerked to a halt, as he saw the tall gent slouching lazily behind him. His narrowed eyes widened in surprise, and hoarse words burst from his pursed lips.

"Heck, it's you! I thought . . ."

The tall gent nodded glumly. "Shore, I know," he growled. "Yuh figured I was dead. It'd be just my bad luck tuh get killed this close tuh Lasson's place. That skunk's slug would have tagged me for good, if yuh hadn't yelled when yuh did. I reckon it spoiled his aim."

Wink chuckled thinly at the tall gent's sour voice. "The way yuh flopped from yore hoss, I figured . . ." He scowled slightly when the tall jasper cut in again.

"An old Injun trick, son. A big, slow gent like me can't dodge lead fer long, so I aimed tuh let him think he got me with his first shot."

WINK'S eyes puckered up, veiling the cold glint that kindled in their depths. Whoever this sour-voiced hombre was, he wasn't as sleepy as he let on. His big-knuckled hands had never strayed far from the brace of bone-handled Colts he wore laced low down, and there was a chilly gleam in his sleepy eyes that didn't escape the short waddy's alert stare. A faint, metallic edge crept into Wink's voice when he spoke.

"This dead gent stole my hoss a while back," he drawled softly. "I was trailin' him on foot, when I saw him cuttin' down on you. Howcome he was so set on peggin' yore hide?"

The tall gent grinned sourly. "This is a bad country for strangers," he growled. "An' it's even wuss for bad-luck jaspers like me. Yuh can call me Gloomy, if yuh're lookin' for a name." Gloomy's sleepy eyes hardened slightly behind hooded lids. "I reckon this skunk was goin' tuh plug me first an' ask questions later. He probably figured I was a lawman, an' wasn't goin' tuh take no chances."

A tingle raced down Wink Dixon's spine, and his slight body stiffened with the tensing of lean muscles. So this was it? The hope that had kindled in his brain died out. This sour-faced gent was another of the outlaws that infested this Lava Canyon country. He hedged back, as Gloomy shoved out a long arm.

"I'll take that paper yuh took out of that gent's pocket, sonny," came the tall gent's lazy words.

Wink's lips tightened, and his eyes screwed down grimly.

"I reckon not," he drawled coldly. "This here paper . . ."

The sound of drumming hoofs floated down the gulch to his ears. Gloomy's long-jawed face changed to a bleak, hard mask. A shiver of tightening muscles shook his rangy frame, then his right hand blurred down toward his gun. Wink faded swiftly to one side of the Colt that whipped up almost in his face. His own gun hopped into his hand, and he slid in under Gloomy's clubbing gun barrel. His Colt swung high, then slashed down in a blue arc. It struck dully. Gloomy groaned. His eyes rolled, and he crumpled heavily to the ground.

Lips thinned, his small face hard-set, grim, Wink stared down at the unconscious man.

"Gonna pole-axe me, huh?" the short waddy muttered bleakly. "Maybe that'll teach yuh a new trick."

Then a cavalcade of riders streamed around a bend in the gulch. He jerked erect, hand tightening on the butt of his gun. They were a hard-bitten bunch, mounted on shaggy grulla broncs, and he didn't have to guess who they were. He started to dive for

the rocks behind him, then halted, as half a dozen guns snapped up to cover him.

Grimly, he held to his gun, as the outlaws piled out of their saddles, and ran toward him. Wink watched them narrowly, hot blood pounding at his temples.

They were killers by every sign of the trade, hard-eyed, expressionless men, dirty, bleary faced. A giant of a man came in the lead, broad faced, with bulging, china-blue eyes. More than once Wink had seen the picture of Spur Lasson posted on reward dodgers around the state.

He recognized others of the motley gun-crew, as they lurched toward him. Ott Muller, a wedge-faced, spade-jawed hombre following close behind Lasson. The sneering, buck-toothed Brazos Kid swinging in from one side, his dark, slitted eyes glinting like chips of jet.

Spur Lasson halted a couple yards from the little waddy. Wink could feel the man's pale eyes traveling over him, probing, questioning. He saw those china-blue eyes widen, as they flashed to the dead man, and the unconscious stranger crumpled on the ground.

"A tough gent, huh?" he rumbled. "Yuh down both of 'em, button?"

Wink nodded. His glance dropped to the muzzle of the Colt gripped in the outlaw's hair-matted hands. Lasson saw his stare, grinned coldly.

"Leary of this gun, huh?" he rasped. "Well, yuh better be. It has the habit of killin' proddy gents that ride into this part of the country without me invitin' em." His voice took on a harsh, grating edge. "Well, don't stand there gawkin'. Who are yuh? What did yuh come here for?"

Wink's blue-gray eyes blinked, tightened grimly. His gun nosing down at his side, started to lift up, then halted as the Brazos Kid lurched forward, jabbed twin Colts into his ribs.

"Don't try it, fella," the Brazos Kid purred softly. "Jest let it slide tuh the ground afore it gets yuh into a mess of lead trouble. I'll take that paper in yore hand."

WINK'S narrowed eyes jerked around, as he felt the letter torn from his fingers. He rolled up on the balls of his feet, poised for one frantic blaze of action against the killer pack. The Brazos Kid tossed the letter to his boss, and laughed softly.

"A ring-tailed terror, ain't yuh, button?" came his purring words. "By thunder, if yuh ain't on the right side, yore gun is goin' tuh be yore ticket tuh . . ."

Spur Lasson's rumbling voice broke the slender killer short. Wink looked around, saw the giant outlaw grinning thickly.

"Cut it, Kid," Lasson growled. "He's all right. Boys, meet Peso Mier. He's the new hand I sent for!"

All the way to Lava Canyon, Wink felt the Brazos Kid's cold eyes fastened on him. Something in that steady, unblinking stare made the little waddy tense. He reasoned that none of Spur Lasson's gang had ever seen the real Peso Mier, but he knew that cold suspicion was riding the slender Brazos Kid hard.

His blue-gray eyes were hooded, hiding the chilly alert lights that flickered in their depths, as he followed the outlaw cavalcade down the gulch. The unconscious body of Gloomy, the tall, sour-faced jasper, sagged behind Ott Muller's saddle.

Minutes dragged by, broken only by the coarse vein of humor that ran through the outlaws. One of them laughed throatily.

"So we got a new pard! Boss, yuh really pick 'em. He's only a fuzz-chin button, but he'll shore throw his share of lead, I'm bettin'."

The Brazos Kid's purring chuckle traced an icy finger down the short waddy's spine. His left hand drifted up to the belt of his jeans, felt the small, gold-plated badge pinned beneath the wide strap of leather. The badge seemed to burn through the belt into his hand. If any of that killer pack ever discovered that he was a Deputy U. S. Marshall . . . . He set his lips grimly, and forced the thought out of his mind. The trail down the rock-choked gulch twisted through boulders that reflected the afternoon heat like an oven. Gradually the walls narrowed, until the trail they followed writhed like a snake through the towering black cliffs that seemed no more than a couple yards apart.

Wink knew he wasn't far from the outlaw stronghold. It was his first time in this part of the country, and he was counting on this to keep his real identity hidden now that the gang thought him to be Peso Mier. And he had heard of Lasson's Lava Canyon hideout once before from a broken down old sheriff who had tried to break up the gang.

"One man holed up at the head of that gulch could stand off a hundred lawmen,"

the oldtimer had said, "and Lasson keeps two on guard. The gulch opens right onto the rim of the canyon, an' the only way to the floor is down a trail that cuts nearly straight down the wall."

Wink thought of this, as the outlaws came to the lip of the canyon. He had seen no guards around, but he knew they must be hidden somewhere on the ledges that shelved out from both walls of the gulch.

The outlaw chief went down the winding trail first. Ott Muller followed, and behind him went a couple other hard-faced men. Wink saw the Brazos Kid watching him, and motioned the cold-faced killer down the trail. That hard, sneering smile on the Kid's lips widened.

"You go first, Peso," the Kid purred. "I'll stick close behind tuh see yuh don't get spooked an' try tuh back out."

Wink grinned, but his eyes behind hooded lids were ice cold. His back itched when that slim-bodied killer was behind him, and he felt like the Kid was laughing at him behind those thin, mocking lips.

His bronc went slowly down that treacherous switch-back trail. At each turn, Wink could look almost straight down on the unconscious body of the man he had knocked out, and over the ears of his horse, the outlaw stronghold looked like miniature stone houses against the gray-green of the canyon floor.

Then the trail sloped off, and Wink breathed more freely. His eyes were narrowed, as they rode up to the cluster of buildings. They were all made of heavy logs, and huge slabs of stone had been leaned against the sides. The Brazos Kid caught Wink's searching glance, chuckled mockingly.

"Bullets don't go through that rock, Peso," he purred. "Which makes this box canyon a devil of a place for a lawman, jest in case he got by the guards we keep up above."

Wink met the killer's mocking stare bleakly, fighting to shake off the cold feeling of uneasiness that kept tracing down his spine. He slid from the saddle when the others dismounted, nerves jangling, keyed to the snapping point.

Spur Lasson turned away from his horse, a wide grin on his puffy lips.

"Couple of you take that unconscious jasper in the empty shack an' lock him up. We'll find out who he is when he comes to. The rest of us will have a drink tuh Peso Mier. He's a little runt, but he shore ain't standin' for his toes gettin' tromped on."

"Wait, Spur!"

IT WAS the Brazos Kid's voice, soft, drawling, edged with a deadly undertone. The outlaw chief turned quickly toward the Kid, his face darkening.

"What's itchin' yuh now?" he rumbled. "Yuh're allus actin' like a bear with sore feet, Kid."

The Kid paced forward, half facing the little lawman, half facing Lasson. His smile was thin, sneering.

"Nothing's wrong, boss," he purred. "Only afore we take any drinks, I figure we'd better get this Peso jasper straightened out. That letter yuh wrote tuh him, boss, I seen yuh write it. It was wrote on the back of a reward dodger out for Peso. That dodger said something about the way Peso packs his gun, an' I don't forget things like that."

Wink's eyes chilled. His mind raced. He searched the Kid's sneering face, his pale, washed-out eyes, saw nothing.

Wink drawled hesitantly, "Well, what about it, fella?"

The short waddy's eyes pulled into slits. He tried to stop the sudden fluttering of his eyelashes, found it impossible. Something was wrong; he could feel it. And he had to say something. Those hard-faced outlaws were staring at him, puzzled, doubtful. His lips tightened, and he felt warm sweat break out in the palm of his gun hand.

Then the Brazos Kid spoke again, his voice soft, silky.

"I never forget anything about guns, younker. The reward dodger said Peso Mier packed his gun for a cross draw. You don't. But that dead gent back in the gulch did!"

The Brazos Kid's last words ended in a snarling curse. His slender hand slashed down, swept up with his Colt, even as Wink clawed his gun out. The Kid's gun roared, as he thumbed back the hammer frantically. A hot iron rammed high in his left shoulder, smashing him backward off balance. Dimly, he saw the Brazos Kid spinning around in a crazy half-circle, his gun hammering wildly into thin air.

Then the pain in his own shoulder seemed to flare into molten fire, that exploded over his brain in a chaos of agony. Lights splattered, died out, and then he

was pitching forward into swirling black clouds of darkness.

"Shore, yuh're the locoest one man riot I ever had the misfortune of meetin'."

The sour-faced gent's grumbling words gradually pulled Wink Dixon back to consciousness. He sat up slowly. His shoulder burned like fire, and trip-hammers of pain drummed at his temples. He sat there groggily a minute, shaking his head slightly as if to clear his brain. Then Gloomy's sour drawl came again from his side.

"I came to from that bust on the head yuh gave me just as they tossed me in here. I saw you an' that buck-toothed killer tangle. He nicked yuh twice, but yore slug punched his ticket. He's dead."

Wink's eyes slanted around to the lantern-jawed stranger. Gloomy was squatting there in the semi-darkness of the room, a dismal expression on his long face. He was rubbing the top of his head where the short waddy's gun barrel had landed.

"I've never seen so much head bustin' in such a short time," he grumbled. "I try tuh bend my gun on yore noggin, an' end up by gettin' my own skull cracked. It ain't that I mind bein' pole-axed once in a while. A bad-luck gent like me gets used tuh that kind of trouble. It's jest that I'm sort of curious, I reckon, that makes me wonder how-come a button like you got mixed up in this ruckus."

Wink grinned crookedly. "I'm wonderin' a lot about you, too," he drawled. "If yuh was an owlhooter, I reckon yuh wouldn't still be in here."

Gloomy shook his head sourly, pale blue eyes veiled, expressionless.

"I reckon not," he growled. "Yuh can ease yore curiosity by tellin' yoreself I'm jest a gent that allus goes around buttin' his head against other jaspers' gun barrels."

Wink's eyes narrowed, and his lips tightened grimly.

"Yuh can figure anything yuh want about me," he bit out. "If yuh're here tuh spy for them skunks outside, yuh won't find out much from me."

HE SHOVED to his feet, planted his legs wide, and fought off the sudden dizziness that swept over him. His head felt like a horse had stepped on it.

He weaved across the dirt floor to where a sliver of light sheeted through a crack in the wall. He pressed his eye close, peering outside. He leaned back, grunting bitterly.

"The devil! It's morning!" he growled.

Gloomy chuckled in a dull monotone. "Yeah, but you spent a quiet night. I tore up my shirt tuh tie up yore wounds. They're gonna kill us today anyhow, so I don't know why I took all that trouble. I heard 'em talkin'."

Wink spun with a flare of anger.

"Yuh don't need tuh be so blasted sour about it," he ground out. "If you ain't one of that gang, yuh'll be in the same mess I am. The way yuh got so hostile with me yest'day, how'd I know what yuh was up to?"

Gloomy grunted mournfully. "Shore, I know that," he growled. "But don't get mad at me. I feel bad enough already. It ain't dyin' that I'm afraid of. My bad luck has been herdin' me toward an early grave since I was born. Only I hate tuh think of dyin' hungry. Come on. Let's get out of here."

Wink stiffened, eyes blinking, following the tall puncher to the corner of the room where Gloomy was climbing up the wall toward the roof. The little lawman crossed the room, eyes bright.

"Yuh sour-faced galoot," he bit out softly. "What yuh tryin' to do?"

"I tore a couple boards loose from the roof last night," came Gloomy's lazy drawl. "Allus said if I lived long enough I'd get an idea that wouldn't be plumb useless. Most ideas I get land me in the bosom of trouble, so tuh speak."

Wink watched intently, while Gloomy slid the loose boards back. Daylight splashed through the opening, slanted into the darkness of the room. Wink's forehead crinkled in a frown.

"We'll never get out without bein' seen. What'd yuh wait for day tuh come for? They'll see us shore."

Gloomy dropped back to the floor, scowling. He chuckled sourly. "'Cause I was scared tuh wake a one-man riot like you up," he growled. "Get up there, runt. I hear them gunnies comin'."

He boosted Wink up to the opening, and the little lawman scrambled through. He waited until Gloomy climbed through to the roof, and slid the loose boards back in place, then started to drop to the ground behind the shed. Gloomy grabbed his arm, pulled him back. They stretched out flat on the roof.

Wink's blinking eyes searched the tall jasper's impassive face, saw nothing. Already he could hear the scuff of boots, as

the gang headed for the building. A harsh voice floated up to his ears.

"We'll dump 'em in the Rio Diablo where it cuts into the cliff. They'll never get out alive."

A man laughed thickly, and an instant later a key grated in the lock on the door. Wink heard the door speak on rusty hinges, then the muffled curse that followed.

"Them skunks got out. . . ."

One of the men yelled harshly. "Hey, Spur! Get out the boys. Them pilgrims got out."

From somewhere over the sudden excited clamor of the gang, Spur Lasson's bull voice roared.

"Get goin', yuh mavericks! There's only one trail out of this place, an' it's guarded. They ain't got no guns. Get them dirty sons!"

A chorus of harsh yells shattered the morning air. Lean, wiry muscles went hard over Wink Dixon's small frame. He flashed a quick glance to Gloomy, saw the sour-faced waddy taking a hitch in his belt.

"I'm hungry," Gloomy groaned softly. "If I ever live tuh set my teeth in a steak again. . . ."

A sudden rattle of hoofs cut the tall gent's grumbling words short. Wink scowled angrily. Whoever this sour-faced galoot was, he probably didn't have enough sense to know what fear was. Or he was too smart to care.

An instant of silence fell, as the killer pack headed for the far end of the canyon. Wink could see the strategy of Gloomy's plan, waiting until the outlaws had deserted camp before sliding off the roof. None of the gang had thought they might be hiding so close at hand.

Wink followed closely, as Gloomy slid down to the eave of the roof, dropped to the ground. They worked cautiously around the corner of the building, saw no one near the cluster of cabins, then broke into a run for the large, stone-slabbed building that stood in the center of the others.

A sudden blaring roar of shots blasted throbbing echoes against the narrow walls of the canyon. Wink shot a wild glance over his shoulder, saw three of the outlaws spurring their horses savagely toward them through a scraggy growth of cottonwoods.

Lead whistled past the slender lawman's ear, kicked up spurts of dust at his feet. He saw Gloomy jerk half around in full stride, stumble, then catch himself, and leap through the open cabin door. Wink followed swiftly, kicked the door shut behind him, barred it. He turned quickly to see Gloomy stumbling across the floor to a rack of rifles.

"Gloomy," he rapped. "Yuh hit bad?"

GLOOMY'S head wagged, and he growled an unintelligible reply. He picked up a rifle, levered the chamber open to see if it was loaded, and dived to a slit in the log walls.

Wink grinned crookedly. He snatched up a rifle, as heavy bodies shocked into the barred door. He laughed tightly, shoved the gun barrel through the peep hole and tried to line it on an outlaw riding up. He triggered a slug that sent the outlaw diving for cover, and chuckled softly.

"We got plenty guns and shells," he bit out. "We can hold 'em back, an' they shore can't bust in."

"An' we can't bust out, neither," Gloomy cut in. "They can keep us in here 'til we starve, if they don't decide tuh burn us out first."

A sudden barrage of lead slapped into the log walls, screamed off the rock slabs propped against the sides of the building. Through the peep hole, Wink lined his sights on Spur Lasson's giant frame crouching behind one of the other buildings, grinned thinly when the outlaw jumped out of sight at the roar of his gun.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Gloomy squint down the sights of his rifle. Smoke billowed into the man's face, when he fired, and levered the spent shell out. He coughed, growled in a gloomy undertone.

"Ain't nothin' that edges my appetite more'n gun smoke. If I could find me a piece of rawhide tuh chew on. . . ."

Wink chuckled. "Quit yore growlin'," he snapped. "We'll be out of here afore long. I got a pard who'll bust this place wide open."

Gloomy's long jaw dropped, and he flashed the little lawman a narrow glance.

"A pard?"

Wink nodded. "I don't know where he is—ain't even met him—but he'll be down here. I reckon it won't hurt tuh talk now. We rigged this job up by mail, my boss an' me, tuh bust up this gang. I'm Wink Dixon, Depity U. S. Marshal. Jim Watson's my boss, only I've never seen him. We worked it up for me tuh get in here an' stir things up long enough for him tuh

bust past them guards at the head of the trail. He'll be down here pronto, an' when he does. . . ."

Gloomy choked, coughed. "This blasted smoke," he growled sourly. "So yuh're a Depity Marshal! I hope tuh blazes yore pard don't let yuh down."

A sudden blatant roar of shots came from the front of the cabin. Through the peep hole, the little lawman saw the gang pour out of the cottonwoods. They were no longer bunched up now, but spread out, taking advantage of every bit of cover that offered.

His eyes were hard, calculating, as he watched them creep forward. They weren't heading directly for the cabin, but were spreading around it, forming a wide, deadly circle. Lead thudded into the walls around the peep holes, splatted into the slabs of rock outside, and screamed off into space.

Eyes cold, blinking, Wink Dixon slammed lead through the slit in the wall. He saw a dark, bleary-faced man lurch to his feet under the impact of a slug, spin wildly on his toes, then crumple to the ground in a limp heap. Another dropped his gun like it was a hot iron, as a bullet raked down the barrel, tore through his hands.

Then abruptly the little lawman was conscious that Gloomy's gun wasn't roaring any more. He flashed a glance over his shoulder to see the lanky waddy sprawled face down on the floor, outstretched hands still holding to his smoking rifle.

Flaring hot rage darkened Dixon's eyes. Blood chilled in his veins, then changed to liquid fire that surged through his veins, throbbed at his temples. A lucky shot from one of those killers outside had found the peep hole in the wall, struck the sour-faced waddy crouching behind it.

Dixon leaped savagely to the rifle rack, snatched up a new gun. He had gotten Gloomy into this, and if Gloomy wasn't already dead, he'd get him out. His lips flattened on clenched teeth, eyes screwing down into cold, bleak slits.

He heard the patter of feet outside the cabin, knew that the outlaws were taking advantage of the moment's silence of his gun, and were rushing in. He leaped to the door, flipped the heavy bar up. Then he faded back to the far wall, eyes chill, face taut, grim.

Quickly, he over-turned a table, crouched behind it, the muzzle of his carbine leveled on the doorway. He heard Spur Lasson's bull voice roar out.

"Rush 'em. If they ain't already dead, they will be when we get in. Don't fire the cabin 'less yuh have to. There's fifty pounds of gun powder in them kegs inside."

WINK flashed the sour-faced gent a last glance. He thought he saw a hard, cold grin fastened on Gloomy's lips, but he wasn't sure. Vaguely, he noticed an overturned powder keg near Gloomy, the bung lying at one side, and the stream of black powder that had spilled from the hole.

Then his eyes went back to the door. Even as he watched, heavy bodies shocked into it. The door slapped open, spilling hard-faced, red-eyed killers into the room. Thrown off balance by the unexpected opening of the door, they pitched in a squirming, tangled mass to the floor.

Wink's carbine roared. As fast as he could lever shells into the chamber, he jerked the trigger. One man relaxed, dead, on the top of that cursing, struggling mass. Another untangled himself, lurched to his feet, then stumbled back to the wall as a heavy slug hammered into his chest. Through the open doorway, the little lawman saw Spur Lasson hunkered down over a brace of bucking Colts, stalking savagely into the cabin.

Then all at once the rest of the gang rolled free of each other, lurched to their feet, guns snapping up. Splinters exploded from the heavy table Dixon crouched behind. Something burrowed through his hat, leaving his head suddenly bare. Then all at once he knew that the carbine in his hands had gone dead, and that the firing-pin was clicking on an empty chamber.

Spur Lasson's giant frame suddenly loomed over him, guns swinging down for the kill. He tried to leap to his feet, club with his empty rifle, then froze, as a harsh voice roared through the smoke-filled room.

"Don't try it, Lasson!"

Spur Lasson whirled. Hard-faced killers flashed startled glances over their shoulders toward the far side of the room. Gloomy, a wild, mirthless grin warping his big mouth, crouched there on his knees. Silence fell like a blanket, broken only by smothered oaths, the slithering sound of guns arching around.

"Pull them triggers," came Gloomy's growling voice, "an' we'll all be scattered all over this end of Texas."

The eyes of the killers snapped down to the match glowing in the tall gent's fingers.

The fire sputtered just over the stream of powder that had spilled from the powder keg.

"Blazes," a man choked. "He wouldn't do it!"

But his voice sounded hollow in the tense silence.

The devilish grin on Gloomy's face widened coldly. "Just try me," he invited softly. "Me an' this one man riot here ain't got nothin' tuh lose." His voice suddenly took on a harsh, grating edge. "Now drop them hoglegs, skunks, or use 'em. This match is burnin' low, an' when I feel the heat I'm droppin' it."

The hoarse breathing of the killers rasped loudly in the silence of the room. For a long instant they hesitated, searching Gloomy's grim face, staring at the flame eating its way down that slender stem of wood. Then a man cursed brokenly, let his gun clatter to the floor. Others dropped their guns quickly.

Tensely, the little lawman leaned forward behind the overturned table, eyes fastened on the giant outlaw leader. Lasson's broad face was shaded a sickly yellow, and his china-blue eyes were glassy, held a wild look. The hammerdogs of his guns rocked nervously under his thumbs, as if he were gauging his chances against the explosion of that keg of powder.

"It's yore play, Lasson," Gloomy drawled.

Then a shiver shook the outlaw leader's giant frame. His gun sagged slowly to the floor, slid out of stiff, nerveless fingers. The little lawman leaped around the table, snatched up two of the fallen Colts and kicked the others to one side.

"Now jest freeze with yore hands on yore hats," he bit out grimly. "This is the law speakin', an' you pole-cats are goin' tuh do the listenin' from now on."

It was minutes later when Gloomy and the little Deputy Marshal had finished tying the outlaws in their saddles, and started toward the trail up the canyon wall.

"Them guards up there will be peaceful if Spur Lasson knows what's good for him," Gloomy spoke up. "They probably sloped when they saw how this ruckus ended."

Wink Dixon's face was pale, and his frayed nerves snapped with a flare of anger.

"Yuh loco galoot!" he lashed out. "Yuh don't need tuh act so cold about it. Don't yuh know what'd happened if that match had slipped from yore fingers? We'd still be lookin' for a place tuh land. Yuh had tuh pull that crack-brained trick. . . ."

Gloomy chuckled mournfully. "Quit yore growlin'," he drawled. "Yuh're gettin' as bad as I am. Reckon yuh jest wanted tuh set tight an' get burned out of that cabin, hopin' yore boss would horn in afore it got too hot."

WINK DIXON flushed, blue-gray eyes dancing with stormy lights.

"Jim Watson is my boss, so keep yore lips buttoned," he snapped. "He's the best danged U. S. Marshal— B'sides, somethin' must've happened that kept him away."

The long-faced waddy choked, coughed to clear his throat. "Shore, something happened tuh him," he drawled sourly. "He got socked on the head an' dragged in here. Yuh hot-headed little runt. I'm the Jim Watson yuh was waitin' for."

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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

Neil came through the door with his gun in his fist.

MEN MUST DIE!

by ADAM MANN

There was no way of proving that his dead father had not borrowed $15,000 on the Flying M . . . but Neil McLean did prove that he would never pay this bogus debt—proved it with the hot lead that was in his own dying body!

NEIL McLEAN, youthful owner of the Flying M, sat on the top rail of the corral fence, tight-lipped, gray eyes smoldering. He had just returned from Alkali, where "Faro" Fanning, suave owner of the Deuces Wild, had bluntly informed him that unless he could immediately raise fifteen thousand in cash, he must vacate the Flying M. The fifteen thousand, Faro had said, represented the amount old Dan McLean, Neil's father, had borrowed from Fanning, giving a mortgage on the ranch and stock as security.

A bitter line of fury gathered about Neil's thin lips and he fairly shook with frustrated rage. For Fanning had lied about that note. Old Dan had never owed the dive-keeper a dime. But with grass waving over his father, Neil knew that he hadn't a chance in the world to prove it. Unless he could raise fifteen thousand today, he was sunk.

"Hey, Neil! I gotta see yuh a minute!"

And Neil McLean, six feet of concentrated honesty, ambition and sheer nerve, slid down from the fence and turned to watch Red Logan, his foreman, striding toward him, his booted feet sending little swirls of dust upward in his haste.

"Lem Travis is up to the house, Neil," the redhead panted. "He says he's gotta see yuh, right away."

Neil's grim face relaxed and a grin twisted his tight lips. "Good!" he exclaimed, starting toward the house. "That helps. I tried to see Travis in town, but he wasn't at the bank. Fanning says he's got dad's note for collection. Lem'll let me have the money all right."

Red Logan's freckled hand shot out and caught his arm.

"Wait a second, Neil," he said, his voice tight and hard. "Lem's got the sheriff with him. Morgan give me orders to bunch the stuff."

"The devil you say!" exclaimed Neil, the smile leaving his lean face, as if slapped away by a heavy hand. "You keep out of this, Red. Somebody's liable to get hurt, and I don't want it to be you." And, turning swiftly, he strode toward the ranch house, across the creek.

RED LOGAN stared after his youthful employer for a brief moment, his eyes taking on a hard glitter. "So!" he muttered, striding after Neil. "They're going to take over the Flying M, eh? We'll see about that!"

Lem Travis rose from the rawhide-bottomed chair on the veranda and rubbed flabby hands across his paunch. "How are yuh, gents," he began pompously, as Neil and Red drew near. "I'm glad to see yuh, Neil. How you feeling?"

"Fine, Travis—just fine," Neil answered grimly, halting at the steps. "So good, in fact, that I'm going to indulge in a little target practice, in just about thirty seconds. I wouldn't a mentioned it, Travis, only you and Morgan are standin' right where I'm fixin' to shoot!"

The banker bleated in fear. His hands darted upward, while his repellently obese bulk quivered like a giant jelly roll. Neil's hand had swooped downward to his gun, hovered there. But grizzled Sheriff Morgan, a big gray-mustached man with a jutting jaw, had plenty of cold nerve. No fear showed in his black eyes as he faced Neil McLean.

"Better fork yore hawss an' slope, McLean," he growled, in the voice of an ill-tempered animal. "That trick draw uh your'n will only get yuh into trouble if yuh don't. Me an' Lem's got business here—legal business."

Red Logan clutched Neil's arm with fingers that bit into the hard flesh. "Watch yore temper, Neil!" he rasped. "Yuh want to spoil everything?"

Neil McLean jerked loose, thin lips curling back, gray eyes aglitter, and glared at the trembling banker.

"Let's lay our cards on the table, Travis," he said harshly. "Fanning sent for me this mornin'—claims he's got my father's note for fifteen thousand, and a mortgage on the Flyin' M. Fanning says yo're holdin' the note. That right, Travis? You got the papers showin' my dad tied up this outfit for that kind of money?"

The banker contrived to lower his trembling arms. He licked his grim, thickly-fleshed lips, blew at the globules of sweat that trickled from his nostrils, and stammered:

"Y-yes, Neil. The—the note was executed over a year ago. I—I've been holdin' it for Fanning. Then, today, he asked me to buy it. Now—you try to understand my position, my boy. I—I'd like to advance yuh the money to pay off the note, but the unpleasant truth is, Neil—yo're too young and inexperienced to handle a proposition as big as the Flying M. My board of directors—"

"Damn yore board of directors!" snarled Neil, one foot on the bottom step of the veranda. "Do I get the money?"

Travis shuddered, stepped back with a jerky movement that sent a ripple of flabby motion along his swelling paunch.

"I—I'm afraid not, Neil," he muttered, shaking his head until his baggy chin swayed with the movement. "Try to understand—"

"You try to understand this!" Neil barked, and with incredible speed, he vaulted onto the low veranda, smacked a hard right into the fleshy pinkness of the banker's face. Travis screamed shrilly, toppled over backward to the floor with a crashing thud, and lay on his broad back, moaning. And then, with the lightning-like speed that was the result of years of unremitting practice and the patient tutelage of his

dead father, Neil's gun leaped into his hand and covered Sheriff Morgan.

"Get out!" he snarled. "Take this damn' money-changin' rat an' ride! Git!"

"Now—you looky here!" roared Morgan, starting forward. He looked once into Neil's flaming eyes, fell back, muttering. He turned to Travis, prodded him with a booted foot. "Git up, Lem—we're ridin'. But we'll dang well be back."

NEIL McLEAN, disgust tinging the stark rage in his eyes, watched the fat banker lurch to unsteady feet. Without a word, or a backward look, the pair mounted and rode across the creek, in the direction of Alkali. Neil turned to Red Logan and spoke calmly.

"Holler at the button who's helpin' the cook, and tell him to bring us a pot of cold tea, will yuh? It's hotter than the hubs of hell."

Five minutes later, in answer to Red's loud-voiced summons, a bewildered-looking youth attired in too-large overalls and a pair of frayed cowboy boots, hesitantly climbed the steps, holding a pitcher of cold tea in one grimy paw.

"Here's yore tea, Mister McLean," the button said.

Neil took the pitcher from the outstretched hand and fished for a moment in the pocket of his Levi's. "Here's a peso, kid," he said kindly, tossing the retreating button a silver dollar. As the lad whirled to catch the coin, an eager grin on his pinched face, Tim started forward, scrutinizing the younker closely.

"Aren't you the kid who's been swampin' for Fanning, at the Deuces Wild?" he asked softly.

The button looked frightened, backed hastily to the edge of the veranda, and nodded. "Yessir," he stammered. "But Mr. Logan, he—he said I could help the cook. I—I been here for three days. Please let me stay, Mister McLean. I don't eat much—honest I don't!"

Neil grinned. "You can stay as long as yuh like, kid," he assured the lad. Then, glancing down at the pitcher of tea in his hand, he grinned again. "Just remember this, kid. I'm right fond of cold tea. I like it out of pitchers, glasses, or bottles. Whenever I send for cold tea, you come a-runnin'. I'll have a dollar for yuh, every time. So long, kid."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Neil was riding away from the Flying M, riding hard, riding alone, his hand close to his holstered gun. He knew that Red Logan's eyes followed him, as he swung into the Alkali trail. But he didn't look back.

He had extracted Red's reluctant promise to remain on the Flying M until further orders, regardless of any changes in ownership which might occur. And now, he was on his way to interview Fanning. And upon the outcome of that interview, Neil knew, hinged his whole future. His eyes were bleak as he touched steel to his horse.

The single street of Alkali was apparently deserted, as he dismounted and hitched his horse at the pole in front of the Deuces Wild. The strident laughter of a percentage girl, the hoarse guffaw of an answering masculine voice—only these sounds broke the somnolent stillness. Neil strode slowly, deliberately, into the place, stepping high, as if he walked on eggs. He turned toward the bar, stared at Faro Fanning, and smiled. . . .

Fanning gulped, grinned, and threw a nervous glance over his shoulder into the murky haze of the long room. Then, with studied indifference, he turned back to Neil McLean, his pale eyes opaque.

"What'll yuh have, McLean?" His voice was thin, strained.

Neil's grin was apologetic. "Travis and Morgan were out to the Flyin' M," he said flatly. "They ordered me to clear out. I need a job, Faro. Got a job for me?"

Fanning's icy eyes filled with triumph. A gusty sigh of relief escaped his thin lips. "What—what kind of a job?" His voice shook with jubilation.

Neil's shoulders sagged. "Beggars," he muttered, "can't be choosers. Just a—a job."

A cold, sardonic leer twisted the saloonman's hawkish features. "W'y, yes, McLean," he purred, "I guess I can fix yuh up. I could use a—swamper." Neil flushed at the man's insulting, slurring tone, and a nervous giggle jerked from a woman behind him. Then, he squared his shoulders resolutely.

"That'll do, Fanning," he said evenly. "I'll start right away. I got no place to go."

Eyes puzzled, manner uncertain, Fanning stared at him.

"Go ahead, McLean," he said contemptu-

ously. "Burney'll show yuh where to start."

With a gesture of weary submission, Neil turned away from the bar and walked slowly toward the barkeep, who stood behind the bar at the far end of the long room. The nervous shuffle of booted feet, the muted mutter of sneering voices, followed him. . . .

Three days later, Red Logan, accompanied by the button who had been assisting the Flying M cook, entered the Deuces Wild. The sight of the unshaven face and the hopeless, dragging walk of his former boss and trail-partner sent Red to the bar, growling for whiskey.

He was on his second drink, when the button, covertly watching the barkeep, slouched close to Neil. A swift exchange, and the button was slipping a folded square of paper into his pocket, and the bloodshot eyes of Fanning's new swamper narrowed, as he pocketed an amber-colored flask. Then, Neil slouched to the bar and said, in a toneless, halting voice:

"How 'bout a drink, Burney? I ain't had but two—"

The beefy barkeep turned from the till, slammed a hairy fist on the wet bar. "No!" he bellowed. "I done told yuh they wouldn't be no more drinks till yuh swamped out this joint! Git busy!"

Red Logan set his glass back on the bar. "Reckon I'll drink over to the Palace," he said sneeringly. "The licker ain't so good there, but the air's better. They keep skunks outside. Come on, kid." And then, without so much as a glance at Neil McLean, he strode from the saloon, the button trotting, like a dog, at his heels.

BURNEY leaned across the bar, both hairy hands on its sticky surface, and stared at Neil McLean in frank disgust.

"Yuh ain't got a friend left in the world, yuh yeller quitter!" he sneered. But only the rhythmic swish-swish of the swamper's mop on the tobacco-stained floor answered him.

A thousand times, in the days that followed, Neil McLean had almost despaired of obtaining the evidence that would return the Flying M to his ownership. He knew that the spread had been sold to the bank at a foreclosure sale. He was certain that this legal maneuver had been only a blind, that Fanning owned the Flying M, lock, stock and barrel.

He stared somberly from the window of his room—a store-room, in the rear of the Deuces Wild. A harsh voice sounded outside the door. Reaching for the half-filled whiskey bottle on the window sill, Neil poured the liquor over his dirty clothing, staggered out into the hall.

Faro Fanning, one hand on the knob of his office door, looked over his shoulder at the apparently drunken swamper.

"Take a look at Mister McLean, Morgan," he sneered. The sheriff paused in the act of entering the office, whirled, and strode to Neil's side.

"Better lay off the red-eye, Neil," he said kindly. "Yore friends are gettin' worried about yuh."

Neil tensed, passed a trembling hand over his haggard face. "Nemmine, Morgan," he muttered harshly. "I'll look out fer myself. An' to hell wi' my friends. Me, I got no friends—on'y this." And he patted his six-gun with a palsied hand.

"Git yore mop an' get busy, McLean," Fanning snarled, glaring venomously at the sheriff.

"Aw ri', Fannin', aw ri'," Neil mumbled, lurching toward the open door which led to the barroom. A disgusted, cynical laugh followed him, as Fanning held open the office door for the sheriff to enter. The door slammed behind them.

Weaving unsteadily to the end of the bar, Neil picked up the bucket and mop with one hand. With the other, he steadied himself, palm braced against the wall of Fanning's office. Despite this precautionary measure, however, he twisted half about on feet that refused to do his bidding, and, with a prodigious sigh, he slumped slowly to the floor. As his head came to rest, one side of it pressed close to the flimsy partition, Burney laughed coarsely.

"Looks like Mister McLean's done turned in—with his boots on," the barkeep chortled, jerking his bullet-head toward the inert heap.

"Somebody ought to kick the red-eye outa him, an' make 'im take a ridin' job," muttered a Flying M puncher. "A feller with guts in his belly an' brains in his head ain't got no business bein' a dang bar-fly."

The heated argument which ensued made the low voices in the office almost unintelligible to Neil McLean. But his straining ears caught jumbled words, disconnected phrases: "Mesquite Mesa . . . ten o'clock

sharp . . . sheepherder's shack . . . all be there. . . ."

Then, the door of the office flung open and the sheriff stumbled over Neil's booted feet, on his way to the front of the saloon. Fanning, cursing horribly, strode close to the apparently helpless swamper, drove a vicious kick into his ribs. Neil's face remained impassive; not so much as an eyelid flickered.

"Drag that damn' swamper into his room and see that he stays there tonight, Burney," Fanning lipped thinly, as he passed the barkeep on his way to the street. The sheriff followed hard upon his heels.

"ALL right, all right, Mister McLean," sneered Burney, as he dragged Neil toward the storeroom. "Inside, yuh lousy bum, an' stay there." He kicked open the door as he finished speaking, dragged Neil inside. Then, abruptly, the door slammed and a key grated in the lock. Neil lay motionless for a moment, then he rose noiselessly to his feet. A slight, tapping sound at the window startled him. Crossing the room with catlike strides, he tugged at the window, raised it. The pinched face of the button—Fanning's ex-swamper—peered up at him.

"Here yuh are, Mister McLean," the younker whispered tensely, as he pressed a bottle into Neil's hand. "Here's yore cold tea."

The bottle fell from Neil's fingers to the ground, as he clutched the lad's bony shoulder. "Listen, Kid," he whispered hoarsely. "You get back to the Flyin' M as quick as yuh can. Tell Red Logan to bring a couple of the boys he can trust and meet me at the old sheepherder's shack on Mesquite Mesa. Yuh got that straight, kid?"

"Yessir," the lad whispered eagerly, and, whirling, he ran off into the shadows, as fast as his scrawny legs could carry him.

Neil held the window up with one hand and swung a long leg over the sill, at the instant a shaft of light lanced over his shoulder. He jerked around to face Bill Burney. His spur caught on the sill and he twisted, fell heavily to the floor.

"Oh-ho!" roared the barkeep, lunging forward. "Goin' bye-bye, huh? W'y, yuh drunken bum, I'll—"

Burney's intentions were never made clear to Neil McLean. For, in the instant the man launched himself upon him, Neil jerked his spur loose and twisted sidewise on the floor. Burney struck the floor with a grunt. Before he could recover from his surprise, Neil's hand, acting with all of the old speed and precision, swooped to his gun.

The gun rose and fell and Burney lost all interest in the proceedings. Neil whirled back to the window. Came a rending crash, then he was on the ground; on the ground and running toward the stable, in the rear.

Mesquite Mesa. Yellow moonlight, creeping shadows. The shrill, receding whine of a coyote in the near distance. Then came a sharper, more staccato sound—the sound of dissenting, high-pitched voices, raised in angry dispute.

Neil McLean dismounted, ground-hitched his cayuse in a clump of mesquite and crept silently forward, carefully avoiding patches of moonlight which would have made a clear target of his wiry bulk. Slowly, noiselessly, he crept through the brush until the black outline of the cabin loomed just ahead. Then he paused, lay prone upon the ground, listening.

Silence, broken only by a deep-throated curse. Then,

"The hell with McLean! Give 'im nothin' —nothin' but his orders!"

"Fool!" snarled another voice, thick with scorn. "That'd be about yore size! Give 'im a thousand—on condition that he leaves the country. The pore devil's drinkin' himself to death, anyhow. Get 'im out uh the country, then the Flyin' M'll be safe. Yuh can hold yore stolen herds there without no interference."

Neil McLean rose stealthily. Gun held at ready, he inched close to the shack, peered in at the windowless opening. Facing each other across a rude table sat Sheriff Morgan and Faro Fanning. Neil's lips tightened. Now was the time!

"Stick up yore paws!" he gritted. "One false move and I'll drill yuh both!"

For one brief instant, surprise contorted both men's features. But in the next, a thousand rockets exploded in Neil's head and he slumped forward, slipped away into blackness . . .

NEIL McLEAN choked back to consciousness, sputtering, coughing, to rid his nose and throat of the water which threatened to strangle him. He struggled to a sitting posture, peered upward through a haze. His lips twisted, thinned.

"So!" he said softly, "it's you, Travis! I wondered why you was so anxious to play

Fanning's game. Yo're in cahoots with the snakes that's usin' the Flyin' M as a hideout for stolen cows!"

The banker jerked backward. He was hatless and covered from head to heels with alkali dust. But it was not the man's disheveled appearance that struck Neil McLean. It was the look on Travis' face—the haunted, desperate look of a man who knows that death lurks just around the corner.

"Yo're wrong, Neil, all wrong," Travis said earnestly, pointing to the fleshless crease above Neil's right temple, where great clots of sticky red had formed. "I been lookin' after yore interests all along. Then, tonight, I got a tip that Morgan and Fanning had arranged a meeting here. I—I got here too late, son. You must've met 'em. That was an awful wallop they handed yuh."

Neil blinked up at the banker. "I'd like to believe yuh, Travis," he said grimly. "I hate to—" He broke off abruptly, as the dull drumming of hoofbeats came to his ears. He stared at Travis, unblinking. "Reckon I'll know where yuh stand, pronto, Travis," he said softly.

Travis whirled toward the door, a frenzied look on his flabby face. "Get up, Neil," he barked. "It's prob'ly Fanning and Morgan, comin' back." And he slammed out into the night.

Neil jerked to his feet. Whirling to the table, he cupped a hand above the lamp chimney, blew out the light. A thrill of surprised relief shot through him, as his lean fingers sought his gun—found it. He didn't need to wait for those riders to prove that Travis was on the level, he thought, as he rushed outside. His holstered gun was proof of that.

Neil threw himself down outside and squirmed into the brush beside the cabin. Behind him, he could hear Travis threshing through the brush like a wounded beast. The hoofbeats were drumming closer. Peering out of his shelter, Neil spotted four riders, twenty yards from the cabin. He leaped to his feet.

"Red!" he called. "Red Logan! It's me —Neil!"

There came an answering roar—the roar of a six-gun. The bullet smashed into Neil's hip, slammed him against the cabin, where he slid to his hands and knees, staring blankly at the ground. Dimly, he heard three more shots, bunched together in as many seconds. Then, he felt rough hands upon him, and Red Logan was dragging him out to the front of the cabin.

"Neil! Neil!" barked Travis, his voice shrill with terror. "Did he get yuh? Are yuh hit?"

Neil lay quietly for a moment, fighting down the wave of nausea that threatened to engulf him. The crashing of brush sounded closer, and Travis burst through and came to a panting halt before the cabin.

"Thank God it's you, Logan," he said hoarsely. "Some dirty bushwhacker shot at me—he must've got Neil. I sent three slugs after him, damn his lousy soul! Is—is Neil bad hit?"

Before the startled Logan could frame a reply, Neil spoke grimly. "Nope. Not bad hit, Travis. Lend a hand here, will yuh? Tear up my shirt and bandage my hip. It's high up—painful as hell, but not too dangerous. Quick, man! We're goin' places!"

TEN minutes later, Neil swung painfully into his saddle, surveyed the five mounted men who faced him. "You, Red," he ordered, "take Laramie, Pete an' the button. Travis will ride with me. We're headin' for that deep canyon, over by Little Muddy. All right, boys, let's ride.

An hour later the cavalcade came to where a deep canyon opened onto a river—the boundary of the Flying M range.

"Just below us," Neil whispered grimly, his face tense with pain, "is the canyon I was tellin' yuh about. There's a tunnel leadin' into it, through the base of this cliff. Me an' you found it years ago, Red. Remember? Well, if my hunch ain't all wet, a herd of cattle will be—if they get through the tunnel. Me, I'm takin' this left trail down into the canyon—me an' Travis. The rest of yuh get hid out in th' brush. Pick off the riders when they begin to squeeze 'em down. Travis an' me'll do th' rest. Come on, Lem."

Crouched behind a boulder, on the canyon floor, Neil waited—with Travis beside him. At length, a low rumble drifted to his straining ears. They were getting close now. In another minute they'd be coming through the tunnel.

Suddenly, the bellowing changed to a rumble. They were in the tunnel.

"Shoot, Travis!" roared Neil. The gun in the fat banker's hand bucked and roared—once, twice. "Shoot!" Neil rapped out. "Empty yore iron!"

"Wait," muttered Travis, fumbling with his cartridge belt. "I—I gotta reload."

Neil McLean came slowly erect, reeling,

sick and giddy with pain. But there was power and precision behind the hand that sent his clubbed gun crashing down upon the banker's skull. As Travis sprawled limply, Neil staggered to his horse, drew himself up into the saddle. Yelling like a maniac, firing as he rode, he spurred straight toward the mouth of the tunnel.

From the far end of the tunnel came the bellowing of a fear-crazed herd stampeding, and Neil knew that the lead had turned—that they were fighting their way from the other end of the tunnel.

A gun cut loose on the canyon's rim. Another . . . and, suddenly, the night trembled with the bleating of terrified cattle and the yammering of guns. Neil whirled his horse and headed back toward the boulder, where he had left Travis. . . .

He didn't hear the rapid tattoo of hoofs coming down the trail into the canyon, nor did he see the exultant Logan, who led four mounted men to his side.

"We got 'em, Neil!" Red was yelping excitedly. "We beefed a couple of 'em—besides Fanning—an' we got Morgan hog-tied, on his cayuse here!"

Neil McLean grinned faintly, swayed in the saddle. He swung down to the ground.

"Fine, Red," he said. "Now, all we—"

"Behind yuh, Mister McLean!" shrilled the button, pointing. Neil whirled, his hand streaking to his gun, and faced Travis. His flabby features contorted with rage, the banker stood on widespread feet, the moonlight glinting on his gun.

Neil's cutter lifted and roared. Travis whirled, crumpling like a bag of oats under the smashing impact of lead.

Red Logan caught his breath with a rasping sound.

"How'd yuh know Travis was mixed up in the deal?" he asked wonderingly. "Or, did yuh know?"

Neil nodded weakly. "Yeah, Red," he whispered. "I knew. I'd suspected him, all along. But tonight, when I was holdin' my gun on Fanning and Morgan, somebody gun-whipped me—from behind. I know, now, that hombre was Travis. But he didn't take my gun. He figgered to keep me at the shack, pretendin' to be my friend. But, when you-all come up th' trail, that throwed a wrench into his plans. So—he got panicky and he shot me from the brush." He paused, swayed drunkenly.

"Yeah," Red nodded, catching Neil's arm to steady him. "I wondered how come he was so sure you was hit. He couldn't uh told it was you from the distance."

"Well," Neil continued weakly, "after he plugged me, he fired his gun three times—remember? That's why I brought him into th' canyon with me. I ordered him to empty his gun into th' canyon. He did—shot twice!

"Four an' two always has made six, Red—so, I was sure. I clubbed him over the head and left him to drive them cows back. He must've come to while I was gone. Travis was the leader of the gang. An' Morgan—well, I figger either Travis or Fanning had something on him. Morgan's always rode straight, up to now. How about it, Morgan? Am I right?"

"RIGHT as rain, Neil," the old lawman said hoarsely. "I been straight for twenty years. But when I was a younker, I heerd th' owl hoot. Me an' Fanning rode th' dark trails. Fanning told Travis about that, an' Lem threatened to turn me in for a job I pulled in Montanny. So, I played their dirty game. I didn't have guts to face it like a man. But, by hell, I can take my punishment like one."

"Where's them papers, Morgan? Th'—th' mortgage an' th' note?"

"In Travis' pocket," the sheriff answered promptly. "I—I was to take 'em to th' county seat, tomorrow."

"Get 'em, Red," Neil ordered, "an' then—turn Morgan loose."

Neil McLean was conscious that he was falling, and that he didn't give a damn. He was dog-tired and sick. As his pain-wracked body came to rest on the rocky canyon floor, the button leaned over him, peered anxiously into his face.

"Here, Mister McLean," the kid shrilled, holding a flask to Neil's twisted lips. "Take a drink uh this. It'll make yuh feel better."

Neil raised his hand, fought to steady his reeling senses. He opened his mouth, drank deeply.

"Hell!" he sputtered, as he turned his head and spat. "Cold tea! I bet I've swallowed a dippin'-vat full uh that in th' last few days, tryin' to make Fanning think I was drinkin' myself to death!"

He sighed deeply and his tired eyes closed. As he slipped away into blackness, he was seeing again the trails he had ridden, and the trails he was yet to ride. And they all ended at the Flying M—his home.

RATTLESNAKE IKE

by THE TRAIL BOSS

A True-Fact Feature of the West When It Was Wild!

THE funny papers and magazines for many years have been fond of using the highly descriptive names, Rattlesnake Pete and Alkali Ike to designate Wild Western characters. Few probably realize that such characters existed in pioneer times and in the flesh. Only, in the passage of time, the names have gotten reversed and their significance slightly twisted.

In reality it was Rattlesnake Ike and Alkali Pete. To be appreciated this little story of these two most unusual characters must needs be a little personal. The writer knew both Rattlesnake Ike and Alkali Pete in his boyhood around the Western mining camps in the early eighties. It is to a boy that the characters would appeal most romantically. We remember them fondly, this altogether picturesque pair. They provided us with many a thrill and not a little spending money in our years between seven and going-on eleven.

The fact that we learned in later years that Rattlesnake Ike, street-vendor of snake oil, a cure-all for man and beast, and his business partner, Alkali Pete, a full-blood Arapahoe Indian, were out-and-out scallywags did not lessen them in our regard. Rogues they might have been, but albeit most genial and entertaining rogues. And if they were scallywags, as the better elements in the Western communities insisted, then to us they were beloved scallywags. There is just enough of the old Wild Western devil in us to leave us hoping in fond memories that Rattlesnake Ike and Alkali Pete fully enjoyed the fruits of every dishonest dollar they cajoled from the gaping and gullible street crowds which were their daily meat.

And we heard as a boy from the older pioneers that, after their day's work of street hawking was done, Rattlesnake Ike and Alkali Pete could put up a ruinously stiff game of stud poker. They were well liked on this account if no other. Their joint poker prowess endeared them to the older pioneers just as their street-pitch

shenanigans endeared them to the children. It remains that these popular mountebanks never actually injured anyone. Their snake oil was harmless, all it was was goose grease, anyway. And their stud poker was a form of practiced assault that caused pains only in the pocketbooks. They worked in the boom times when money was pretty much easy come, easy go.

Motion picture and other revelations of boom times in the old West are not exaggerations. A boyhood memory will serve to prove this. We can remember when small boys and girls were paid a big, round, silver dollar just for running a little errand or doing a simple chore. They tossed dollars around much as pennies are handled now. The ground everywhere was giving up gold in large quantities. The mines were owned by carefree and extravagant individuals given to spectacular spending and not by carefully managed international corporations and syndicates as is the case today. There is still plenty of gold in the West, but not enough of the old-time prospectors. But back to our heroes—

Rattlesnake Ike and Alkali Pete were colorful bits that fitted jigsaw puzzle-like in kaleidoscopic pattern that was the old Wild West. The crowds in the camps took most of their relaxation, amusement and much of their business into the streets, particularly in the afternoons and evenings. This was because the buildings were not ample to accommodate the crowds of highly good-humored and sociable folk.

To do business with this ready-money crowd, merchants, gamblers and the rest moved their counters right up to their doors and in many instances right out onto the sidewalks. The merchants took the inside of the walks where they could lean their stocks against the walls, and the gamblers, pitch-men, wandering minstrels, mountebanks took to the curb. This friendly and profitable arrangement made Rattlesnake Ike and Alkali Pete members of the curb market, so to speak. They were among hundreds of itinerant medicine showmen, pitchmen and gamblers who moved about among the camps doing a terrific business and having a lot of fun.

NOR were these old medicine shows all of a fraudulent nature. It is a fact that in 1878 a big Chicago medical concern was impressed with the profitable business being done by the cure-all fakirs in the West. This company headed by a Dr. Hamlin, went the medicine showman one better. Dr. Hamlin bought an elephant to head a parade of buck-dancers, banjo-pickers, bone-rattlers and other performers popular to the period. He turned this show loose with an expert and highly educated spieler and sold ten cents worth of red-pepper liniment at two dollars a bottle. It was, as usual, "good for man and beast." To prove it the spieler-demonstrator would rub a little on the bulging hips of Bertha the elephant—and if an elephant isn't a beast, then just what is an elephant?

And furthermore, if the liniment wasn't good for Bertha why did she not turn on her tormentors and stamp them out? Of course the reasons were that Bertha's beauty was two inches of tough skin deep. Besides, Bertha had been trained to keep her trunk away from there so she wouldn't get the damned hot stuff up her snoot.

The Hamlin show, the largest free medicine show of its time, rolled up

millions for Dr. Hamlin, but was not as successful in comparison as Rattlesnake Ike's pitch and some others. Yet, Dr. Hamlin was rich and Ike was poor. The difference was that Dr. Hamlin was investing his profits in legitimate laboratories and sanitaria and Ike and the other lesser mountebanks were piddling theirs. But Rattlesnake Ike liked his own way better. He saw old Doc Hamlin's show and made just one comment: "At feed time it's a toss-up to see whether the elephant or the actors and actresses eat the most. I could send Alkali Ike over there and he'd eat everything in sight, including the trained dog act and Bertha."

Rattlesnake Ike was originally a hardware salesman out of St. Louis who could pick a banjo and sing songs. He made just the one trip as a hardware salesman. He got drunk in a saloon in Golden, Colo., with an Indian who had just come up from Arizona and had alkali all over his leathern and beaded clothes. They went to sleep together and woke up together and never separated after that. The Indian who could handle snakes taught the snake charmer's art to Ike, and Ike says this broke him of the whiskey habit. Anyway the Indian not only sold Ike the idea of the snake-charming business as a quick road to wealth but also sold him a big basket of snakes and his own services. The snake oil—"rub it on and get well; it limbers up the muscles and makes old people young" —was an idea furnished by a town druggist in Golden when they went looking for some medicine that would sell at a big profit.

Alkali Pete had a right to his name, for in roaming the deserts, foothills and plains hunting the deadly rattler he would become dusty with the alkali of the sagebrush country. After long treks through the wild country he would show up in the saloons of the West, his clothing white with alkali and bearing a white man's clothes basket full of deadly snakes. He had been known as Alkali Pete for some years before he formed the medicine show combination with the St. Louis traveling salesman with a flair for the dramatic and the spectacular and the devil's own gift of gab.

With Alkali Pete's help Rattlesnake Ike garbed himself in a Wild Western costume which was part that of cowboy and part that of scout. He let his handsome auburn hair grow and it fell about his shoulders in natural waves. He had the reputation of being the handsomest man of the old West with the possible exception of Texas Jack Omahondro, who was not a Texan at all but came of a pioneer Southern California Spanish family. The two looked much alike save that Ike was fairer complexioned. Texas Jack was a Government scout and Indian interpreter. Incidentally, he was an inveterate gambler and a deadly gunfighter. The two, at intervals, when they met were cronies and Alkali Pete always went along. Pete doted on Texas Jack because Jack could speak Arapahoe as well as other native Indian tongues.

All three of these odd characters were decent as far as the good pioneer women were concerned. They could be trusted in their relations with the wives and daughters of the miners and cowmen. This made them worthy of business patronage of the mining camps and cow towns. The fact that the snake oil combination were scallywags, in a mercantile sense, made little difference to the broad-minded, easy-going people of the place and the period. The other medicine-show troupes, all of them

larger than the snake oil pitch, were never as popular. The women bought snake oil because Rattlesnake Ike was handsome and the Indian impressive in full paint and feathers. The men bought it because Ike and Pete were placid, adroit and companionable poker players. The fact that snake oil might not be all that was claimed as a cure-all never bothered anyone, not even the children with whom Rattlesnake Ike and his sophisticated Indian were great favorites.

IKE and Pete would show up in a town garbed fantastically, as described. They would take up their place at the curb and pitch their high box full of jars of goose grease, perfumed with lavender and medicated with camphor and turpentine. They would open their basket of snakes and a few minutes later snakes would be coiled about the two of them from their heads to their feet. Many of the reptiles would be the deadly diamond-back rattler species and some would be as long as seven feet, with a bunch of rattles buzzing like electric buzzers.

Every Westerner has a profound realization and respect for the diamond-back rattler as a killer. There is not enough money in the world to hire the average Westerner to pick one of these venomous and deadly snakes off the ground. It is natural that the rattlesnake medicine show went big and did a rousing business. Rattlesnake Ike would further entertain the crowd by singing and plunking his banjo and the Indian would do his tribal whoops and dances. Then they would unload all the snake oil the traffic would stand and move on to a new pitch or a poker game somewhere or other.

The real secret of the success of Rattlesnake Ike and Alkali Pete was vested in a weird tribal ability of the Indian member of the firm. This Indian tribal trick was the ability to expertly remove a rattlesnake's fangs without injuring his health, pep, courage, or lessening the volume of his rattle. Otherwise the snake oil combination of Ike and Pete would not have lasted any longer than it takes the human blood circulation to carry snake venom to the heart from any given anatomical location.

Rattlesnake Ike and his Indian were playing a constant game with death, at that, for there was always a chance that Pete might inadvertently overlook a single snake in the fang extraction process. It was a good thing for Rattlesnake Ike that Indians are probably the least absent-minded people in the world. From infancy the early Indian's life depended on his alertness not only to protect him from snakes but his other natural enemies, including his own kind.

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NOVEMBER ISSUE NOW ON SALE

There stood the Swede, the muzzle of his rifle in his hands, in vain effort to beat off the pack.

THE BLOODY-HANDED ONE

by CHARLES CLAY

The Swede had laughed when he had hung the Chipewan's traps up in the trees, and thereby condemned the Indian and his family to a winter of starving-hell. . . . But he didn't know that a victim of the damned could call up one last bullet from the purgatory to whence he was doomed!

NIGHT'S deep pall of darkness hung over the Canadian sub-Arctic. It was cold. Lake ice boomed with the bite of the frost, and in low ground sappy birch trees split with pistol-crack sharpness. Hardly another sound broke the stillness, unless you could call the whispering fush-fush of a scurrying rabbit a sound.

At the foot of a south-sloping knoll,

among a thick grove of pine trees, two Chipewayan Indians lay rolled in their skin blankets. A dog toboggan leaned against a tree nearby, and five small balls of fur in snug holes in the snow were five husky dogs. All was silent: both men and dogs slept. Even the fire was dead out, and its gray ashes looked like dirty snow in the brilliant starlight.

A hunting owl sailed over the camp, peered down suspiciously, and veered away in alarm, its harsh "hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo" echoing through the forest.

A dog stirred uneasily and whined in its sleep. As if it were a signal, one of the bundles of skin blankets moved, a hand flung back the coverings, and a head appeared.

Okatotan, the Bloody-Handed-One, squinted up at the stars.

"Kuh!" he grunted with satisfaction. The handle of the Big Dipper was swinging towards the east. Dawn was in the making.

With a smooth continuous rolling motion the Indian opened his sleeping robe and stood up. He was tall and straight in his buckskin shirt and trousers; his mighty frame was stored with the energy of wind and sun. He drew his squirrel-skin hat from under the skins and thrust it over two short braids of hair which hung down his shoulders. He donned his caribou parka, which he had used as a pillow. And he was fully dressed except for his moccasins.

These hung on two slender poles near the dead fire. Okatotan stood on the edge of his bed and reached across the snow for them with a stick.

"No, Maskepeton, lazy one!" he cried. "Haste, or Pesim, the Sun, will be up ere thee."

The second sleeper stirred and grunted and came to life.

"How late is the night?" he asked.

"Dawn in two pipe smokes. We should be close to Lynx Lake by noon," answered Okatotan, as he twisted the thongs of his moccasins around his ankles.

Maskepeton, the Mighty Warrior, sat up. His broad face was puffed and stiff with sleep. He also glanced at the sky.

"The stars twinkle too much. There will be wind this day"; his voice was soft and musical, like singing aspen leaves.

"That is true," agreed Okatotan, "but we will have plenty of shelter until we reach the lake."

"The snow will drift," grumbled Maskepeton.

"Ho!" laughed his companion, "you are but thinking of yourself! Do not worry, there will be a good trail on the lake."

"Kuh!" grunted Maskepeton. It was the Indian miracle word, with a hundred meanings, depending on the way it was used. Maskepeton sounded it with a rising inflection. He was not too easily assured.

WHILE they were talking, Okatotan was making shavings from a dry pole with his axe, and in a few moments a blaze sprang from the ashes, and grew large as he fed it with sticks and bits of wood.

Okatotan rolled two green logs close to the fire, one on each side of it, and added more fuel. He filled a kettle with snow and sat it astraddle the logs. As the heat hit the metal, the snow began to melt, and popped angrily.

The blaze mounted higher, and darkness closed in upon the little clearing, and nothing could be seen beyond the circle of light. The breath of the two men, even close to the fire, issued forth in white cloudy streams.

The dogs snooped about their beds, ranging the lengths of their chains, looking for scraps of fish which might have escaped them the night before. And as Maskepeton chopped chunks of fat salt pork from a frozen slab with his axe, the odor of it came to their nostrils and they whined for a share.

Okatotan propped a frozen bannock up to the heat, and opened a tin of jam. The water in the kettle was boiling, and he threw in two handfuls of black tea leaves, watching the brew bubble and froth while he protected his face from the blaze. He lifted the kettle off with a stick, and dropped in a slab of snow to settle the leaves.

"Here is your pigmeat"; Maskepeton brusquely handed him the frying pan.

Okatotan took it eagerly in his fingers, and juggled a mouthful of the hot stuff. He broke off a large chunk of the bannock and crunched it voraciously.

"We will be in the Sliding-One's country by noon," Maskepeton, the Mighty Warrior, volunteered.

Okatotan, the Bloody-Handed-One, grunted.

"I wonder if we will see him?" The food and the warm blaze made Maskepeton uncommonly loquacious.

"He is bad," commented his companion in answer, and Maskepeton understood that Okatotan hoped that their path would not cross the Sliding-One's path.

"If he has touched my traps this time . . ." Okatotan did not need to finish the sentence: the flash of his eyes in his long, lean face, the click of his teeth, and the tightening of the cords of his neck finished it for him. His copper skin glowed in the ruddy light of the fire.

"The whiteman trader said that the police would help you," Maskepeton remarked.

Okatotan spat in the snow and did not answer.

"But the Sliding-One says that it is his trapping ground," Maskepeton continued.

"It is my trapping ground, as it was my father's, and his father's before him. My people have always trapped in the Lynx Lake country. And I am going to continue trapping there."

It was a long speech for Okatotan and a brief silence fell upon the meal. The logs in the fire crackled pleasantly.

"But the Swede-man, the Sliding-One, pulled up your traps at the snow-time before this one," Maskepeton resumed the conversation.

"And I set them again before this last Christmas," Okatotan replied shortly.

"What will you do if they are touched this time? Hung up in trees"; Maskepeton cast a covert glance at his companion, as he recalled an angry scene now a year old.

Okatotan did not answer for a moment. He stared moodily at the flickering blaze of the fire. And in his mind appeared a cabin, a whiteman's cabin, on the shore of Lynx Lake; before this cabin he saw himself, surly with rage, listening to a tall Swede announce with arrogant assurance that he had come to trap in the Lynx Lake country, that the Government had given him a permit just for that, and that no Indians were to hunt in those parts. And if they did, the Swede went on, he would hang their traps in the trees for their pains.

Bewildered at this intrusion in his age-old trapping grounds, Okatotan had asked advice of a trader, and had learned that the Swede was bluffing about permits and was trying to frighten off Indian competition. Okatotan had set his traps, and they had been lifted. This was the winter before. And it had been a bad time for Okatotan, because his fur catch had been cut in half. So this winter he had set his traps again. And now he was on his way to look at them. What would be the result this time? He scowled darkly.

"My name is not Okatotan, the Bloody-Handed-One, for nothing"; he answered Maskepeton's question in a brittle voice, that clinked like fragments of ice jostled together.

"Kuh!" his companion grunted heavily, in the back of his throat, and lapsed into silence, wondering what Okatotan meant by his cryptic remark.

A half hour later they were breaking camp. Bed-rolls were tied up with leather thongs, grub-box repacked, and everything securely fastened to the toboggan.

MASKEPETON reached his snowshoes down from a tree where he had hung them the night before. He laced them to his moccasins, slung his rifle through his arm, and without a word set off along the dark trail into the east at a jog trot.

Okatotan busied himself harnessing his dogs to the toboggan. They were unruly and snarled at each other, and twice he had to cow them by flourishing the heavy butt of his long whip. He never turned his back upon them, and they watched him covertly, with evil eyes. But when at last all was ready, and Okatotan flung a glance over the campsite to see that nothing was forgotten, and satisfied, cracked his whip loudly, the dogs threw themselves into their harness with a lunge. They set off briskly along the snowshoe marks of Maskepeton.

The trail wound in and out along the ravines between rocky ridges. And as soon as the dying light of the fire had been left behind, and his eyes became accustomed to the dimmer glow of the stars, Okatotan found it easy enough to see. He cracked his whip and clung to the headline of the toboggan as he ran behind. Maskepeton had a good half-hour start, and there was a faint pearl glow in the eastern sky above the pine tree tops before Okatotan felt the dogs increase their pace. The lead dog held his nose close to the trail and whined. Okatotan knew that Maskepeton was not far ahead.

Soon the trail dipped down a sharper incline and dropped over the steep bank of a small creek. But this time, although the sun was not yet up, it was daylight. Okatotan found his trail-breaker waiting for him a short way down the stream.

"Fisher tracks," Maskepeton pointed to little scratches in the crusted snow.

"Good," exclaimed Okatotan. "We come back this way, so I shall set a trap here."

He snubbed the headline of the toboggan to an overhanging tree and pulled a trap from beneath the scroll. Without further

conversation, Maskepeton again set off down the winding stream. He disappeared behind a bend.

Twenty minutes later Okatotan followed. The course of the trail held roughly east, twisting ever and anon to avoid an obstructing ridge of rock. As the dogs rounded a curve and started down a straight stretch, the sun suddenly popped into view, a round brass ball of light; light which flung itself at the snow-laden trees, and glittered off the frost crystals, and bounded back into the sky again, making that vast dome a pale blue canopy. The long shadows of the trees cut deeply into the snow, and the little mounds which Maskepeton's snowshoes kicked up cast their own little shadows by the side of the trail.

Gradually the creek became wider, small tributaries merged into it, and on its expanse of ice the snow became less and less deep. Okatotan came upon Maskepeton's snowshoes standing by the trail. They were no longer needed. He thrust them under the top lacings of the toboggan.

Twice during the course of the morning he stopped the dogs to set traps, and once he saw a lynx's path across the creek, and knowing the lynx's habit of retracing its steps, he went a little distance and placed a snare where it would jump into it.

The sun climbed within an hour of noon before his dogs swept around a broad bend in the little river. It was the mouth of the stream, and the shore of Lynx Lake!

Maskepeton was standing by a fire which he had made under the lee of the bank.

Okatotan pulled the dogs to a halt.

"Good traveling!" he cried.

Maskepeton's broad face beamed.

"And good eating!" he answered, pointing to the split carcass of a rabbit that was sizzling on a forked stick before the blaze.

"Kuh!" grunted Okatotan, with an explosive intonation of pleasure.

They were soon in the midst of their meal, tearing the hot juicy meat of the rabbit to pieces with their sharp teeth, and gnawing partly thawed chunks of bannock. Scalding-hot tea washed their gullets. They stood before the fire on a mat of brush as they ate. The sharp February cold pierced their clothes like knives, and they turned around from time to time.

"It will be bad on the lake," commented Maskepeton.

"Truly it will be cold," assented Okatotan, "but there will be little drifting."

"Yes," agreed his companion, "there seems to be less snow in these parts."

"That will lessen the fox catch," said Okatotan. "They will keep to the bush because the snow is not deep enough to make traveling bad."

"That is so," nodded Maskepeton. "Have you many fox sets on the lake?"

"Yes. The first one is just beyond Eagle Point"; Okatotan waved his hand in a general northerly direction.

A SHORT while later, the hoods of their parkas up to protect their faces from the keen-edged wind, the two Indians were heading north along the shore. They came to Eagle Point.

Although Okatotan had set the trap there nearly two months before, and several snowfalls had altered the scene, he unerringly indicated a slight knoll twenty yards off the rocks of the point.

"That is the trap, there," he directed.

Maskepeton trudged over to it.

"Empty," he called. The mound of snow had not been disturbed.

"Lift it up. We can use it for a mink set."

Maskepeton thrust the butt of his rifle into the top of the mound. It broke through a thin snow crust, revealing a little hollow beneath. There was a metallic snap as the jaws of the trap bit the stock. And Maskepeton pulled it forth. It was anchored to a sapling which had frozen to the ice. He tugged it loose.

"Not a very good start," he commented as he threw the trap and sapling onto the toboggan.

"There are many more traps," replied Okatotan phlegmatically.

But there was nothing in some of them, either. For a different reason.

The next sets visited were at the mouth of a little creek. As they approached the place Maskepeton saw a slight blaze on a poplar tree against the somber forest background. He knew at once that the trap, for weasel or mink, was at the mouth of a cavern formed by an overhanging bank, below the blazed tree.

He began to run when he got near the mouth of the creek. Okatotan followed quickly behind. And then he saw what had caused his companion to hurry. His trap was hanging on a stick near the set, its chain swinging idly in the wind.

"The Sliding-One!" Maskepeton cried.

"Offspring of the Wolverine!" Okatotan spat out the oath.

It looked like the Swede was again carrying out his threat. And as they proceeded along the line, they learned how cunningly observant their enemy was. He had spotted more than half of the traps, and had carefully hung them in trees or on sticks. In several of them, tufts of hair indicated that there had been a kill of some kind, which had been left in, at the mercy of ravens, wolves and other birds and beasts of prey.

"If only the Sliding-One would steal the fur," cried Maskepeton, as he came to a set and pointed to a trap dangling on a willow bush. In the trap's jaws was the withered paw of a red fox.

"Yes," growled Okatotan viciously, "then we could have the police chase him for thieving. But what can we do now? He only hangs my traps up, because he says this is his trapping country. And he lies!"

Okatotan lapsed into silence, and his eyes smouldered with hatred and perplexity.

His fur catch was being ruined by the Swede; and in Okatotan's mind there sprang a vision of his wife and children. Were they to starve as last winter? For every trap that had been molested by the Swede, Okatotan's anger rose a little higher. His eyes kindled until a fierce hot fire burned in them; he looked at the butt of his rifle protruding from the top of his toboggan, and vindictive thoughts rushed through his head. What right had the Swede, a strange whiteman, to deprive him and his family of their sustenance? Was there no law in the land for a poor Indian? And a plan slowly formed in his mind. Perhaps the Swede might meet with a little accident?

The two Indians worked their way northward along the shore of the lake. They reset traps in likely places, and picked several good mink and a fisher from sets that the Swede had failed to see. Early in the afternoon they reached rough rock country. The shore was bordered by jagged cliffs, and long arms of rock thrust themselves out into the lake.

"The Sliding-One's cabin is not far from here, is it?" volunteered Maskepeton, as they built a mound of snow off a point.

"Two smokes to the east in Pine Bay," Okatotan growled, keeping his thoughts to himself while he hollowed a little hole in the mound and nestled a trap in it.

Maskepeton laid a slab of snow over the trap, and shaved it with a stick until it was only a thin crust. Okatotan sprinkled scraps of bait over the mound, and buried some pieces in it near the top.

He was hammering the lid back on the bait can, when the whine of a bullet came to him through his parka hood, and his eye caught the spray of snow it kicked up.

"Aieee!" cried Maskepeton, who also had heard it. He jumped to his feet and looked wildly about him. No one was in sight.

There was a second whine, and another bullet smacked the snow in the same place.

"Who takes us for moose?" shouted Maskepeton, waving his arms like flails to prove to the invisible shooter that he was no moose. Okatotan realized at once what was happening.

"To the bush," he hissed. "It is the Sliding-One!"

Maskepeton needed no second bidding.

Okatotan wriggled through the snow to the toboggan which lay in the shelter of some boulders near the shore. He pulled his rifle from beneath the ropes. His eyes blazed with lust and revenge. Surely the gods had answered his petitions!

When he reached the shelter of the bush, he found Maskepeton peering through the pines to the distant shore of the lake.

"He is trying to frighten us off"; Okatotan's voice was full of menace.

MASKEPETON was too angry to answer directly. He indicated a point of land projecting from the far shore. The tip was about nine hundred yards away.

"See those two whiskey jacks flying from tree to tree?" he asked. "I think that he is among the rocks there."

Maskepeton adjusted the sights of his rifle, whipped it to his shoulder, and fired in the direction he had pointed.

A hard smile flitted across Okatotan's mouth. He had been wondering how he was going to entice Maskepeton to help him attack the Sliding-One. This was the answer. The ancient gods were still friendly.

The echo of Maskepeton's shot had hardly died away ere a branch crackled above their heads, and the faint report of the Swede's rifle came to their ears. The duel was on!

Okatotan hugged boulder as he peered carefully in the direction of the distant point. He took in the lay of the land. And his eyes gleamed with the cunning lust of a stalking animal. Maskepeton's rifle barked again. A bullet from the Swede nicked the boulder protecting Okatotan.

"Look, Maskepeton," exclaimed Okatotan excitedly, "see that island! I will go up the shore through the bush and I can reach

the back of the point from its shelter. The Sliding-One will meet his fate! When I fire two shots in rapid succession, bring the dogs across the lake."

It seemed a perfect plan. Maskepeton's face shone with excitement.

"We will catch the Sliding-One in his own trap!" he exclaimed.

Okatotan crawled across the snow to the toboggan for his snowshoes, and returned to the bush, his movements hidden from the opposite shore by the scattered rocks on the point. And as he set off up through the bush to gain the island's protection, the snap and crack of Maskepeton's rifle echoed in his ears.

Half an hour later, after a considerable silence from the point, Maskepeton heard two shots in rapid succession. And he saw Okatotan emerge from the bush and signal.

"He has fooled us," snarled Okatotan angrily. "He was gone when I got here. Look at his marks."

Maskepeton examined two parallel grooves in the snow made by skis.

"The Sliding-One is as snaky as the marks he makes in the snow," he said. "And we shall track him!"

Okatotan bit the words off, and they zipped into the air venomously.

"I shall go ahead. You follow with the dogs. Watch them closely. We go into the wind and they will get his scent first."

Okatotan, the Bloody-Handed-One, was skilled in all the wiles of the chase, and when the quarry was a whiteman, detested as such and detested doubly as the marauder of his trapline, his nostrils quivered with the eagerness of a wolf closing in upon prey.

For an hour they followed swiftly but stealthily the ski tracks of the Swede, which led off along a bush trail. The only sounds on the still winter air were the sugary crunch-crunch of snowshoes, the soft patter of dogs' feet, the whine of the toboggan grinding in the dry snow, and the soft "quees-quees" of a wandering whiskey jack.

Okatotan's eyes were alert and questing, ranging ahead when the trail was clear, and continually darting along the Swede's ski tracks reading the signs of his flight. But Okatotan's mind was dark and brooding; it was filled with murderous thoughts; and he no longer saw the Swede as a man, a human being like himself, but as the incarnate cause of all his own tribulations.

Life had become a burden, a heavy load that made his feet sink deeper and deeper into the soft trail. Let the Swede die, and his difficulties would become resolved.

Okatotan held up his hand and Maskepeton drew the dogs to a halt.

"The Sliding-One is traveling fast," he called back to his companion. "Twice he stopped to rest. And we gained a little. But not much."

He tested the little heaps of snow at the edge of the ski trail. They were beginning to stiffen with the frost.

"He is at least two miles ahead of us," he added. "We shall be close with him in half an hour. Perhaps when we come to this side of Pine Bay. He will slow up soon because he is nearing home."

SHADOWS from the descending sun lengthened across the trail, and patterned it like a black and white goose's wing. But Okatotan had no eye for the primitive beauty of his native country. His legs sent his snowshoes crunching forward, carrying him ever nearer his prey.

Suddenly in consternation and amazement, and looked at the Sliding-One's tracks. They were no longer clear and distinct, but smudged and broken by the paws of animals. Okatotan ran forward again, his face blazing with astonishment. Pad-marks, as large as saucers, wove in and out through the bush, and finally concentrated into a single grim file—following the ski trail!

Once more Okatotan stopped Maskepeton and the dogs. And he was not surprised to see the dogs cringing and whining.

"Wolves!" he cried, and a short blast of keen-edged laughter broke from his lips. "Eight gray timber wolves are following the Sliding-One! They are thin and hungry and they travel swiftly!

"Come! Perhaps we can see their kill!"

Okatotan smiled, and his dark face was long and fiendish with the vindictive pleasure of his smile. This day the ancient gods were indeed favorable to Okatotan, the Bloody-Handed-One!

He swung off along the trail, at an increased speed, his eyes questing and his gun alert. The wind carried no scent to his nostrils, but it did to the dogs, and they hung back in their harness, until Maskepeton plied his whip upon their flanks and flung angry words at them in an intense hissing voice. But they could not keep up with Okatotan's long-strided eager pace.

And as he ran, his mind swung from the Sliding-One to the wolves, and back from the beasts of prey to their quarry. It flashed on him that he and Maskepeton

alone were completely aware of the unfolding drama—the unapprised Swede, homebound, ignorant of the swift silent plunging doom that was overtaking him; the wolves, with lolling tongues, dropping spittle of anticipation along the trail, loping speedily after their prey, meat, to appease the gnaw of hunger in gaunt bellies; and two Chipewayans, following up the wind on the tracks of the hunger-mad wolves.

Unconsciously Okatotan increased his pace. And his mind, darting back and forth from pursued to pursuer, came to rest on the pursuers—the wolves. They were his natural enemies. From boyhood he had fought their depredations along his trapline, and their slaughter of moose and deer and caribou, the meat animals of him and his people. And the picture in his mind's eye of eight grey phantom shapes loping along that winter trail after prey dimmed the picture of the Sliding-One. In the new perspective of those tense moments, Okatotan forgot the Swede as the incarnation of his troubles, and saw him only as the prey of his hereditary enemy, the wolves.

Okatotan's long mechanical strides increased as he flung himself along the trail. He must overtake and kill the wolves. That was his quest. It was now incidental that the wolves were chasing the detested Swede. Some vague deep-seated instinct demanded that he, Okatotan, thwart the wolves, the age-old enemies of the Indian.

On this fantastic chase, Okatotan came to the brow of a hill, and saw over the treetops the white expanse of Pine Bay spread a quarter of a mile below him. There were no tell-tale dots on the ice to betray the Sliding-One and the wolves. They must be just ahead!

Okatotan dashed down the slope with reckless haste. The snow flew from the ends of his snowshoes as he ran. He flipped back the hood of his parka with a jerk of his head, and his breath streamed behind him in frozen white clouds. He had covered half the distance to the shore of the Bay when the crack of rifle shots in quick succession came to him.

Although he could not see because of the thick fringe of trees between him and the Bay, Okatotan knew what they meant! The Swede was on the ice and he had discovered the wolves on his trail! Okatotan fired a shot into the air without breaking his stride.

Then he suddenly burst through the last of the trees and was at the edge of the lake. And he was the sole witness of the tragedy. Several hundred yards out on the ice, the wolves had at last overtaken the Sliding-One. There he stood, the muzzle of his rifle in his hands, whirling it about him in a vain effort to beat off the pack. One wolf lay in the snow. And before Okatotan, shaking with violent breathing and excitement, could adjust his sights, the Swede fell under the onrush of the beasts.

Okatotan shouted to attract the wolves, kneeled, squinted along his rifle barrel, and threw shot after shot as close to the struggling melee as he dared. A wolf circling the edge of the fight howled and leapt high into the air. It drew the pack's attention, and they left their prey and loped in an oblique line swiftly towards the shore.

OKATOTAN ran to the Swede lying on the ice. He turned him over. One glance at the bearded face was enough. The red patch of snow by his throat grew larger and redder. Okatotan suddenly felt weak, and sweat streamed down his face. He lifted his eyes from the huddled figure in the snow to the trail he had run down. Maskepeton and the dogs were emerging from the bush. They sped across the ice.

"Yes," nodded Okatotan, "he is dead."

"Kuh!" grunted Maskepeton, throatily, and spat. His eyes took in the scene. The two dead wolves interested him most. He caught one by the tail and lifted it up. The forequarters lay limp upon the ice.

"Truly they are big," he commented.

"I tried to kill the wolves," muttered Okatotan. He was reliving that minute.

"Kuh?" Maskepeton's eyes widened. He looked at the Swede. "Why didn't he shoot them? Look, he must have seen them soon enough. He got his sliding-things off."

Okatotan noticed for the first time that the Swede had slipped out of the skiis.

"And look," added Maskepeton, "see where he kneeled to shoot."

He pointed to the unmistakable impression of a corduroy knee a few paces towards the shore from the scuffle.

"But he missed all of them and he shot several times"; Okatotan picked up the Swede's rifle. It still held two shells.

"It is truly wonderful!" Okatotan cried. "Look at the sights! They are set for 900 yards. He forgot to change them after shooting at us!"

"Kuh!" Maskepeton grunted deeply, in an abrupt explosive breath of finality.

Dan shot his fist to Spade's jaw.

FIGHTING COWARD

By E. B. MANN

A Colt duel with a slower gunhawk foe meant powdersmoke redemption for Dan Coward . . . but when Coward balanced a lovely girl's happiness against his self-respect, he accepted the West's most hated stigma—the coyote brand!

REDDY CURRAN whipped a fast left at Dan Coward's jaw, and missed; and the next thing he heard was the raucous jeers of the half dozen or so skirt-shy cow-pokes decorating the bunks of the Ninety-seven bunkhouse.

This was the night of the Rodeo which Pop Turner and his daughter, June, put on each year to celebrate the beginning of the dude season, and Reddy and Dan had got to scuffling in the bathhouse and had put on the gloves to settle it.

Don't get me wrong. Reddy and Dan were friends; side-kicks. You may have

A HEART-APPEALING YARN OF A COLT-MAN'S TRIGGER RENUNCIATION!

heard of Red; he was a pug. A good one, too; or so they said. He was still good. Good enough to be cock-o'-the-walk in any ordinary bunkhouse.

Well, Dan was kneeling over Reddy almost before he hit the floor. "I'm sorry, Red. I didn't mean— You all right, keed?"

Reddy sat up and laid the heel of his glove against his jaw and pushed it careful. The jaw waggled and Red nodded. "I reckon so. All in one piece, anyway. . . . Dog-gone you, Dan! In spite of all I've taught you, you will leave yourself wide open for a left hook—and every time I try to land one and cure you of it, you land that right! It just ain't right!"

Pop Turner chuckled. "Make up yo' mind, Reddy. Either it is a right, or it ain't one. Whichever it is, it's poison, ain't it? . . . Y'know, Dan, after seein' that fancy shootin' act you done this afternoon, and seein' you battle Reddy here this evenin', it's plumb surprisin' to me that a man with yo' gifts—"

He stopped talking suddenly and his face got red, as if he'd choked on something. And he had. He'd choked on Dan Coward's reputation. What he'd started out to say, and what everybody listening knew he'd started to say, was, "It's plumb surprisin' that you'd let Spade Malone make a doormat out o' you!"

Which was exactly what a lot of folks were wondering. Dan Coward had been there in the Twin Rivers country for ten years or better, and folks liked him. He was big, and he was a likable cuss, and he could do a man's work afoot or a-horseback, and nobody stopped to figure whether he was a fighting man or not because he'd never had any trouble. Some men draw trouble the way a sorghum-can draws flies. Others go through life without ever a riffle, yet nobody that knows them ever doubts their courage. You just figure if trouble happened to hit them they'd face it, and you let it go at that.

It was that way with Dan . . . until Spade Malone got there. It seems those two had known each other as kids, and Spade no sooner laid eyes on Dan than he started riding him. Did it deliberate, Spade did; and did it mean. Made it real plain that he figured Dan's name was more than just a handle: that it was descriptive. Coward . . . And Dan took it.

Well, you know how things like that take hold. Folks saw Spade bearing down on Dan, and Dan sidestepping him, and they got to thinking how Dan had sidestepped other times. Before, they'd figured Dan just wasn't quarrelsome and was willing to let his head save his knuckles. Now, they began to wonder if maybe Spade was right.

Dan could toss bottles into the air and bust them with a six-gun; and he could lick Reddy Curran with the gloves on—but could he fight barefisted, and did he have the guts to sling lead at a target that could shoot back at him? That was what folks were asking, and the more Spade rode him the nearer they came to arriving at an answer.

Pop Turner coughed. "Humph! . . . Well . . . I better go. Dance's been goin' most an hour and if I ain't there t' call them square-dances June'll scalp me. . . . Well—so-long . . ."

He ducked, and made his getaway. The rest of the bunch followed him, and that left Dan and Reddy to dress by their lonesomes. And Red was sore.

He said, "He's right, at that! It beats all hell how a man like you lets a loud-mouthed four-flusher like Malone bluff him! It ain't a lack o' guts, Dan; I know that. I thought it was, at first—until that mornin' you snapped that rattler out o' my blankets by the tail, and you bare-handed. . . . What is it, anyway, you jughead?"

"Maybe I'm just livin' up to my name, Reddy. Like Spade says." Dan was under the shower now—they had those things at the Ninety-seven now that it was a dude ranch—and his voice was sort of muffled. Reddy looked at him, but Dan's eyes were closed and his face was all screwed up and Reddy couldn't tell whether it was on account of the water being cold, or what. "Give a dog a bad name, you know . . ."

"Horse-feathers!" Reddy said disgustedly. "Don't be a fool!"

But maybe Dan was right, at that. You hang a name like Coward on a kid, and add to it something a lot of young hellions are sure to find out and jeer at—a thing the kid himself can't understand, or help, but hates—and you got the makings of a first-class phobia, all right. You just imagine it about yourself!

Dan finished dressing finally and stepped outside. It was dark there in the shadow of the bunkhouse and Dan leaned back against the 'dobe wall, rolling a cigarette. The main house yonder was brilliant with lights, swarming with people, noisy with

music and laughter and the rhythmic shuffle of dancing feet.

Pop Turner had hated the idea of turning his outfit into a dude ranch; swore he'd never give up cows to "ride wet-nurse on a bunch o' city slickers!" But June had persuaded him, and the profits of the experiment were lifting the Ninety-seven out of dangerous proximity to red ink.

A girl in a short white coat and a man in black came past the corner of the main house and strolled toward the horse corral, and Dan's right hand, poised to strike the match for his smoke, halted. The girl was June Turner.

He couldn't see her face against the light, but he recognized her wrap. . . . And the man—was Spade Malone. There was no question about that. Spade's left knee was slightly stiff from a bullet wound acquired in a gambling brawl. And Dan could see that this man limped.

June Turner and Spade Malone!

It was generally known that the man who gave Spade his limp would have been justified if he had more nearly centered his target. Spade was that kind of a gambler. . . . And there was talk, too, of woman-trouble back of the gambling quarrel. Something about the loser's wife. . . . He was the loser, too; more ways than one. Spade was a finished gambler in a school where the .45 was better than Hoyle, and the man who knicked him was dying with Spade's slug in his chest when he drove his own bullet into Spade's knee.

And June! Strange that she'd fall for such a man! Malone was handsome, yes; but he was mean. Cruel. Given to sudden, insane rage. Angered, the man was dangerous; as dangerous as the ugly wolfish dog he had for a pet. . . .

The couple halted at the corner of the horse corral and Dan could hear their voices in a low intermingling murmur. He stood in the shadow, unconscious of his eavesdropping until it was too late. . . . The girl's white coat stood out with painful clarity against the dark, so that every move she made was clear. She leaned toward the man, lifting a face that was a ghostly blur in the moonlight, her white sleeves raised, circling Malone, pulling him down to take her kiss. . . . Dan turned, tip-toeing silently toward the barns.

It was an hour later when Dan Coward joined the crowd in the main house and he was still sick and strangely numb. He knew what he had seen, and he knew what it meant. June was not a girl who gave her favors lightly. . . . And she had given them. She had gone into Spade's arms willingly, and more than willingly. . . .

Pop Turner spoke to him as he entered the house and Dan nodded without actually hearing Turner's words. He said, "I'm leavin', Pop. Feel sort of—whipped. Ridin' this afternoon, and all. . . . Tell June—"

"Why not speak for yourself, John Alden?"

Dan turned slowly, unwillingly, to meet June Turner's level eyes. There was laughter there, and open friendliness. But Dan said woodenly, "I've got to go. Sorry . . ."

"But Dan! You haven't danced with me! You can't go without dancing with your hostess! . . ."

She stopped, looking beyond him at the crowd. Dan was suddenly aware of silence. He was turning even as Malone spoke to him. Malone stood facing him, his hands hidden behind him, grinning. Back of Malone the crowd stood motionless, all eyes upon the group there in the doorway.

"I've got a little present for you, Coward," Malone said softly. "I've been tellin' the folks about your nickname—the one we called you back in school. 'Kitty' Coward. They wondered why we called you that. I'm—showin' 'em!"

His hands came forward suddenly, swinging a cat. He tossed it straight at Coward's face.

Dan heard a voice—his own—jagged and horrible. The cat brushed past his face and dropped to his shoulder, its claws digging. He struck at it—flung it aside. It fell, hissing, back arched, its hair on end. He kicked at it.

A wave of laughter hit him like an icy wave. He turned blindly, head bowed, and lurched outside. Behind him, he heard Malone's voice lifting above the crowd's laughter. "'Kitty' Coward! You see, folks? It fits! Kitty—Coward!"

In the deep shadow beside the bunkhouse wall Dan found a bench and sank down on it, shivering with a reaction that was like a chill. He knew, tonight, what hell was like! Seeing June Turner in Spade Malone's arms . . . and now—this! Before them all! Before June, and June's friends! And his friends, too; his neighbors. . . .

They'd laugh at him; despise him. They couldn't understand a thing like this; they couldn't know the awfulness of a sick, mad fear you couldn't fight, couldn't control. It wasn't as if he hadn't tried to control

it; to reason against it. Time and again he'd thought he'd licked it. . . .

He didn't hear June until she spoke to him, and he turned, startled. "I'm sorry, Dan. . . . Dad tried to warn you. I didn't know. . . . Would it help to—talk about it?"

She sat down close to him and Dan saw that she was wearing that same coat. He hated it! Except for it, he might not have recognized her a while ago; might not have known. . . . Not that it made any difference, now . . . !

"I'm just—what Spade said I was, June. A coward! Talking won't cure it."

"But, Dan—! It didn't hurt you, really. It couldn't have! It was only a kitten. . . ."

"Sure! Only a kitten! Harmless as a kitten! That's—funny! . . . All I know is, once when I was little I picked up a cat and I must've hurt it some way because it struck at me; ripped my face wide open. Mother went crazy for a minute; thought I was blinded. Maybe it was her fear that did it; I don't know. . . . Only, ever since then, I've been afraid of cats! Deathly afraid! . . .

"The kids at school found out, and made life hell for me. I'd fight 'em, and then somebody'd toss a cat at me—and I'd run! I've never been in a fight since—a real one—that I haven't been licked because I was expecting somebody to throw a cat in my face! . . . . I'm—yellow!"

"Don't be silly, Dan! Yellow—you? Look, Dan; I saw you ride the Mad Hatter right after he'd killed Eddie Marlowe. Nobody can tell me you're yellow! You've got a—a complex; a phobia. . . ."

"Whatever you call it, it's—hell!"

"I know; but—if you'd force yourself to fight it . . . make yourself fight it—"

He stood up suddenly. "Sure! All it needs is—guts! Guts enough to make myself beat it! Sure; that's right! Only—I haven't got 'em! I've tried. . . . And tonight, when that cat came at me, I went crazy! You can't fight a thing when you're crazy with fear, June; when you can't control yourself. . . ."

He wheeled, striding away from her. Later, she heard the hammer of his horse's hoofs. . . .

THERE was little talking among the men who gathered for breakfast at Coward's Circle Six table next morning. Those who had been to the dance kept silent because they felt the grouch of a sleepless night, for one thing; but that was only a part of the reason. Talk must inevitably swing to the subject of what had happened last night; and they liked Dan. His shame was theirs.

Even Dan's foreman, hard-bitten veteran, was willing to overlook a fault in a man he liked. Coming home from the dance last night, he'd said, "There's a streak in every man, I reckon, you take the trouble t' find it. Me, I'm scared t' death o' frawgs! Some folks eat 'em! But they give me the shivers."

Dan, too, had spent a sleepless night in spite of his early departure from the dance. And—he had reached a conclusion. It was not an easy conclusion to reach, nor a happy one; but it was made. He'd sell his spread; clear out; start fresh somewhere.

The Circle Six had been worth a nice sum when he bought it, and was worth more now; enough to set him up in the cattle business elsewhere. It would be easier, he thought, to live where he'd not be seeing June Turner. Easier to live where, for a while at least, the men he'd meet wouldn't be hiding—or not hiding—their sneering laughter. . . .

The town of Tecumseh, twenty miles westward from the Circle Six, sweltered under the white heat of the early summer afternoon when Dan rode into it, and the gray dust of the street spurted up like smoke about his horse's hoofs. A buckboard stood in front of the hotel and a collie dog under it was panting even in the shade.

In the shaded sanctuary of the hotel porch, men sat tilted far back in easy chairs, torpid with heat. One figure there caught Coward's eye and he reined his buckskin to the hitching rail and dismounted. Pop Turner spoke as Dan came up the steps.

"Hi, Dan. Hot, eh? . . . June dragged me into town, durn her. . . . Sit down, Dan; take a load off yo' feet."

Dan nodded. "Storm brewin', I reckon. . . . Pop, I want to sell the Circle Six. I rode in, figurin' to list it with Parsons; but I saw you, and I thought you might be interested. I'll make you a price, if you want it. . . ."

Pop Turner removed his boots from the porch rail and let his chair down carefully. Beyond that rail, swift shadows fell across the dusty street and a sullen rumble of thunder sent a faint tremor through the buildings.

"Look, Dan," Pop Turner said. "Don't be a fool! This thing—this thing that's

troublin' you—it ain't as bad as you're imaginin' it! . . . You're jokin', Dan!"

"I'm serious, Pop."

A second peal of thunder rolled toward them swiftly and burst, just overhead, and Dan glanced up at seething, churning, jet-black clouds. Rain spattered blackly on the dusty walk and a horse snorted loudly as the cold drops stung him.

Dan said, "My mind's made up. You want the spread?"

Pop shrugged. "Well, now . . . O' course I want it, Dan. But—lord! I'd have to think it over some . . ."

Southward along the street a screen door slammed and a girl in a pongee shirt and tan whipcord riding breeches came briskly past the corner of a store, her high-heeled boots making a quick rhythm on the plank walk. It was June. Pop Turner saw her past Dan Coward's shoulder and felt a thrill of pride in her. Dan had not turned.

"O' course, if you're sellin', the logical thing is fo' me t' buy; I see that. Wouldn't want just any Tom-Dick-or-Harry borderin' my range . . . But—hell . . .!"

June's footsteps, nearer, filled the pause. Turner's face froze. "Good god-a'mighty, Dan—look there!"

Dan wheeled. June, turning toward the hotel steps, smiled up at him. And back of her a great black dog came loping straight across the dusty street, head swinging low, jaws slavering . . .

The collie dozing under the buckboard yonder stood up to make a friendly overture and the black one slashed at him viciously, without a sound. The collie's yelp had the ring of deadly terror in it. His hackles rose. He turned, and ran.

"Mad dog!"

Pop Turner's yell followed the instant knowledge in Dan's own mind. He'd never seen a dog gone mad before, but—this was it! Spade Malone's dog—big, surly devil—mad! He'd heard somewhere that mad dogs fear water. Perhaps it was true; perhaps the dog was running from the rain.

June reached the steps and Turner yelled at her. But it was Dan who leaped and caught her arms and flung her into Turner's hands. And, as he leaped, he swept his Stetson off his head, making a glove of it.

The hat, with Dan's left fist behind it, drove out straight into foam-flecked jaws; for the dog had leaped without a pause, growling. The slaver from his jaws stained June's short skirt.

Dan's blow went to the throat, hurling the beast aside and down. As he fell, the dog snapped sideways, like a wolf, his poison teeth ripping the felt of Coward's hat. A gun barked heavily and Turner found time to wonder how Dan had managed to draw so swiftly. One shot—the red flame licking down into a tawny chest—and that was all.

Dan turned slowly, wiping the slaver from his hand . . . And Turner saw that that hand was clean; unmarked. The dog had missed! Pop gulped, seeking for words. Dan sheathed his gun.

The hotel door burst outward suddenly under the impact of a hard-driven shoulder and Dan's eyes lifted instantly, traveling past Turner. Pop saw Dan's lips draw thin and tight.

Malone stood just outside that door, crouched low, his elbows bent. He wasn't handsome now, at all. His face was flushed and oddly twisted; and his eyes were red—like the dog's eyes had been when he leaped . . .

"You killed him!" Malone's voice was low, rasping, as if the words choked him. "Killed him t' get even with me for last night! Afraid t' tackle me—you killed my dog!"

"It wasn't that. The dog was mad!"

"You lie!"

It was insane of course; yet it was real. Malone's right hand struck down, jerking his gun. Dan saw the deadly purpose in Malone's red eyes.

Pop Turner yelled.

Dan lunged straight out, shooting his fist to Spade's jaw. His left shot home. The quick spat-spat of fists on flesh was sharp and clear. Malone went back a pace, head rolling under jolting blows. He fell . . . and Dan stood over him. Pop Turner knelt and snatched Spade's gun . . .

It struck Dan suddenly that he was not afraid! Waiting for Spade to rise again, he knew a poignant hunger for more battle! He hoped desperately that Spade would rise! All fear was lost, this time, in the wild savage thrill of fighting; of solid blows well-targeted. He thought, "Maybe I've never been this mad before!" And was amused . . .

Malone stayed where he fell. He'd had enough.

Boots thudded heavily along the walk and Dan turned to face a growing crowd. A dozen men had materialized out of nowhere

to stand staring, their voices making a little curious din. They were wet, most of them. The rain was falling now in a steady downpour.

The voices were still of a sudden and Dan faced Spade Malone again. Malone was on his feet at last, weaving, his thick lips mashed into a bloody smear. "You just —postponed it, Dan! . . . Turner—gi'me my gun!"

Pop shook his head. "Not now. I'll leave it at the hotel desk. You can get it when I'm gone."

A muscle alongside Spade's mouth twitched nervously. He scowled, but he nodded. "Dan," he said softly, "When I get my gun—I'm comin' after you! If you're a man —you'll wait for me!"

He glanced down then at the body of his dog lying there in the eave-drip. There was silence around him as he turned and walked down the steps and away down the street; and there was silence afterward while two men lifted the dog and carried it to the end of the porch and dropped it over the rail, out of sight.The crowd was waiting, watching Dan.

Dan saw, instead, bright moonlight on a girl's white coat; two figures, man and girl, standing beside a horse-corral. The girl's arms lifted hungrily. She raised her lips . . . She loved the man. No doubt of that; no earthly doubt of it.

In a little while now, that man would come hunting for Dan Coward. Dan could meet him, talk to him in gun-smoke—or leave the country. He wasn't afraid to meet Malone. He'd met him once today, and beaten him. He could again. He knew that certainly, and the thought of doing it brought no fear with it. And yet—he could not, either. Not when it meant what it would mean—to June!

No; he would leave. That's what the town expected him to do. It wouldn't surprise anyone that a man afraid of a kitten should be afraid of Malone . . . And yet—it was harder, somehow, to pretend to fear than it had been to mask it! If he faced Malone today there would be no fear in him again, ever. He knew that, without knowing how he knew it. . . . But if he ran—

Pop Turner said, "Thanks, son. That was a nervy thing. I'm thankin' you. He would've had June, sure."

Dan shrugged. "It was safe enough," he said slowly. "I covered my hand with my hat."

"Yeah? And his teeth tore through the hat like it was paper! If he'd gone an eighth of an inch deeper—"

Dan grinned. "Maybe if I'd thought of that I wouldn't have done it."

"Maybe you wouldn't," Pop said softly; but there was no conviction in his tone. "Anyway, I'm thankin' you. . . . And it ain't over, Dan. Malone meant what he said to you. You ain't forgettin' that, are you?"

Dan said, "I'm not forgettin' it. I'm—leavin' town."

One of the men on the porch laughed oddly and turned. One by one, the others followed him, filing in through the hotel door and through the lobby to the bar. Someone said, harshly, "See? What'd I tell yuh? A flash in the pan; that's all. Acted without thinkin'. Now that he's had time t' think—"

The roar of rain on the tin roof and the hard crash of the thunder shut off those sounds and June said, "Dan."

Dan turned. She stood between him and the steps. She said, "You've whipped your fear . . . That's true, Dan; isn't it?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't look that way, does it? You heard what I said . . ."

"But you weren't afraid a while ago; not of the dog, nor of Malone! I watched you, Dan; I saw your eyes. I know! . . . Why don't you meet him, Dan?"

Dan stared at her. "You mean—? You mean, you want me to—? . . . I'd kill him, June. I'm faster with a gun than Spade . ."

"I know . . ."

"But—June! I thought—I thought you loved him! I saw you—in his arms—last night!"

Her head jerked up. "Last night? You're crazy, Dan! . . . What did you see?"

He told her, spilling words in one swift rush that faltered oddly as he saw the sudden gleam of laughter in her eyes. "But, Dan! That wasn't me! Silly! You should've known!"

"Not you? But, June—the coat!"

"I loaned the coat to Betty Duane—one of my dudes! The little fool! I didn't know she'd set her cap for Spade; I'll talk to her . . ."

A sheet of flame broke blindingly around them then and the crash of the thunder was like an explosion. June screamed and came straight into Dan's encircling arms.

She was laughing, but there was a trace of hysteria in her laughter and Dan held her, his big hands soothing her. She said, "You see? I'm scared of something, too! I've got a phobia . . . I'm terrified when lightning bangs like that! I've always been!"

Dan's laughter rolled in time with hers, deep in his throat. "We'll make a pair, then won't we, June? You scared of thunder, me, of cats!"

Something brushed lightly past Dan's leg. He felt it dimly through his riding boot. It came again . . .

June stirred and looked down suddenly. Dan bent his head to brush her hair.

She pulled away from him. "Look, Dan!" And waited, watching him.

He looked, following her pointing finger. A great black cat, back arched, leaned on his boot and purred, rubbing herself full length. He stood there, watching her. She turned, winding herself between his feet again.

He raised his eyes. They met June's questioning gaze, and met it steadily. There was no panic in him now; no fear. He said, "I'm not afraid of it! See, June? I'm—not—afraid of it!"

She nodded happily. "I see. It's over, Dan. . . . You won't even have to fight Malone to beat it; you've beaten it already . ."

Dan laughed. His laughter had a rich exultant ring in it. "I'll meet him, though!" he said. "I'll take the cat—and stuff it down his doggoned throat! I'll make him eat it, fur and all!"

THE END

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MAGAZINE

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by Harold Titus

Between forest fire, and broken contracts and murder, Nan Downer and her timber holdings were hell-bent for ruin . . . Only Kerry Young, the despised enemy of the king of Mad Woman Valley, could help her—by blasting forever his dreams that some day he might avenge himself on the killer who had made him an orphan!

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by R. J. Green and C. T. Jackson

FANGS OF THE NORTH
by Vingie E. Roe

In that corpse-strewn hell-town C. A. Detective Gil Norcross found that he could avenge a saddle pard's cowardly bushwhacking—by making his lovely sweetheart a bounty-hunted gallows ghost!

The lone rider was firing at his companions.

AS GIL NORCROSS jingled across the porch of the Tres Pulgas post office, he realized he was being closely scrutinized by a slit-eyed gent with a mutilated ear who sat humped in a tilted chair on the veranda of the adjoining building which housed the Brimstone Bar. But Norcross gave no sign of having noticed and strode on into the post office.

At the sound of his jingling spurs crossing the floor, a girl came to the window marked "General Delivery." The big rider swept his shapeless sombrero from his tousled brown head and took the girl in with frank admiration in his eyes. She had high-piled coppery hair, full red lips with tiny dimples at the corners, soft hazel eyes as clear as a pool beneath a willow, but

A SMASHING YARN OF A CATTLE ASSOCIATION DETECTIVE'S

TERROR RIDES IN TRES PULGAS

by MOJAVE LLOYD

shadowed, Gil thought, by a vague uneasiness.

He could see she was sizing him up for exactly what he appeared to be—six-feet-two of leathery cowboy, dusty and trail-worn. A lazy smile softened the keenness of his steel-gray eyes, broke the rugged lines of his bronzed face, exposed gelaming white teeth in a wide good-humored mouth.

A warm flush spreading upward from the girl's neck relieved the paleness of her small face. Her eyes too revealed something more than casual interest. She lifted long silky lashes inquiringly.

"Gil Norcross is the name," the lanky stranger said.

If he had said "Judas Iscariot" the girl's expression couldn't have altered more quickly. There was a tightening around her lips and eyes. Her oval face paled again. When she sorted through a bundle of letters and handed one out, Norcross caught the trembling of her hand. Then he caught something else—an opening and closing of both eyes while her gaze was not on him, but past his shoulder. He whirled.

Barely did he catch a glimpse of a face at the street window—the slit-eyed face of

VENGEANCE VIGIL IN A LEAD-STUNG HELL-TOWN!

the man with the mutilated ear. He whirled back. The friendliness was gone now from his gray eyes.

"Why did you signal to that gun-dog who I am?" he asked flatly.

The girl's limpid eyes were panicky. Her face flushed and paled. Then her little pointed chin came up. But when she spoke, her red lips quivered.

"Besides being impudent," she said thinly, "you must be loco!"

SHE reached up above the window and released a catch. A wooden blind dropped in front of Gil's nose with a bang. He stood there for a minute listening to the girl's footsteps fading in the rear, then with a twisted grin on his haggard face he cat-footed to the door with his sinewy right hand hovering over the scarred gun-butt on his right thigh.

The slit-eyed man had vanished. Gil knew there was no use searching for him—not now. He swung along the street and shouldered into a Chink cafe.

Supper time had passed. The cafe was deserted. Gil went back and sat down with his broad back in a corner, facing the door. While he waited, he read his letter.

Don't take a chance on coming openly to the Leaning G, twelve miles due west of town. Ride south four miles. Swing west into Big Coulee and follow that till you pass the mouth of Crazy Man Creek and hit two big sycamores with a boulder between. Then come four miles due north to the spread. Keep your powder dry.
MOSS GOODNIGHT

A fat Chinaman with a face like a greasy full moon set down a bowl of soup and pattered back to the kitchen. Gil read the letter through carefully a second time, then tore it and the envelope into small squares and stirred them into the steaming soup. The Chink brought the rest of his supper. While he ate he thought, wondered too if he would ever finish that meal.

Gil Norcross was a top-hand with the New Mexico Cattlemen's Association. For reasons he never talked about, he hated all outlaws worse than scorpions on his shirt tail.

A week ago a telegram had come to headquarters in Santa Fe from Moss Goodnight urgently requesting a man. The entire Tres Pulgas Basin was being rapidly stripped of cattle by a band of thieves nobody could uncover. A secret meeting of the cattlemen had been held and this action decided upon.

Goodnight went on to say that Jeff McLeod, town marshal, had been murdered by the rustlers—shot in the back. That's what made Norcross ask for the job. Jeff McLeod was the best friend Gil ever had. When Gil thought of Little Jeff, as loyal a saddle-mate as ever a man rode the river with, cold rage chilled his heart.

Gil Norcross was detailed. Moss Goodnight was telegraphed to that effect and instructed to have a letter containing details waiting in the post office.

"And here I am," mused Norcross. "But instead of being under cover, I'm most likely hemmed in right now by a ring of gun-slicks. Somebody run a whizzer on me through that Vision of Delight in the post office. And where does she horn in?" He shook his massive head mournfully. "And she seemed so sweet!" Then he got an idea.

Once whoever was behind all this had learned that a man had been sent for, that the man coming was "Gil Norcross," and that a letter would be waiting for him, it was only necessary to post a lookout at the post office to watch strangers calling for mail and get a signal from the girl when the right one blew in. And that information could have been received from but one source—a tip-off on the telegrams.

Big Gil Norcross banged a silver dollar on the table and slid to his feet. The Chinaman was lighting his lamps. Gil was surprised to see that night had fallen. He stepped out into the darkness, then slid sidewise. Out of the corner of his eye he caught the glint of lamplight on a gun barrel in the black shadow beside the gnarled trunk of a cottonwood tree.

In such a tight, Gil Norcross acted first and thought afterward. The spurt of flame from the tree trunk was a shade behind matching his own. He threw himself sidewise. A slug snarled past his cheek. When no second shot came, he darted for the tree.

A man lay huddled in the dust. Norcross rolled him over and slewed him around to get his face in the light. It was the gun-slick with the mutilated ear. He had another mutilation now—a gaping hole through his neck.

Men came plunging from doorways all along the dimly lit street. Remembering what he was here for, Norcross knew he must make a quick getaway. But the dying dry-gulcher was mumbling. Gil dropped on one knee and put an ear down to his lips.

"He was chain lightnin', Crowley!" mumbled the gunny. Then he died.

Booted feet were thudding on the plank walks. Men were yelling hoarsely. Gil leaped into the narrow opening between the cafe and the store next door, and from there faded into the blackness of an alley. There was no telling if his getaway had been seen.

"Crowley! Crowley!" he kept muttering, then recalled where he had seen that name. It was in black letters on a galvanized sign he had noticed when he rode into town—"Crowley's Brimstone Bar."

"That don't make sense," he thought as he ran. "There ain't no law in Tres Pulgas since Little Jeff was back-shot, and most likely Crowley wants it should stay that way. But if Crowley is the crow behind all this, he knows I ain't no lawman come to clean up his town. But—" he crashed over an ash can, leaped to his feet and ran on—"if Crowley is the boss rustler in these parts, that would make sense."

THE dopey little telegraph agent was dozing at his desk when something woke him up with a start—Norcross' gun muzzle in the ribs.

"The name is Gil Norcross," the big fellow said distinctly. "Before I drill a circle of holes around your belly button, I want to know who you tipped off I was coming."

"I didn't tell nobody!" quavered the cringing agent.

"It ain't good for your soul to lie," advised Norcross, "not just before going to hell anyhow. I know you told somebody. My question is who? Quick!"

The terrified agent dropped on his knees beside his desk and stuck both hands in the air. "If you promise not to kill me," he blubbered, "I'll talk."

"She's a deal," gritted Norcross. "Talk!"

"I stole forty dollars one time," blubbered the agent, " and I got found out. From then on I've had to show every wire, or go to the pen. I can't go to the pen, mister. I'm a sick man. I'd die!"

"Who do you show the wires to?" demanded Gil.

"Tom Padway," pleaded the agent. "It was from his bank I stole the forty dollars."

The tall terror to cattle thieves left the agent groveling on the floor and strode through the darkness to the feed stable where he had left his horse. He was settling his big Brazos saddle on Slumberheels' strong back when the little stableman came hobbling out of a stall leading a mare that made Norcross stop dead.

"I don't wonder, cowboy," chuckled the stableman. "This here's the finest piece of palomino horseflesh in the Basin. She's a queen, and she is rode by a queen."

"I have found considerable knaves in this hell-hole," said Norcross, "but nary a queen."

"You would," affirmed the liveryman, "if you looked in the post office. Miss Mary Randall, she owns this mare." He grabbed a comb and brush. "Miss Mary will be in right soon. Workin' daytimes, she mostly does her ridin' at night."

Gil rode out the back door of the stable and out of town by back ways, then struck south as he had been told by Goodnight. His thoughts were jumbled. Too many folks were getting bogged in this pie. He better learn what Moss Goodnight had to say.

Tom Padway might or might not be hooked up with Crowley. Padway got copies of all telegrams. Gil suddenly remembered that he had been grossly careless in one respect—he had failed to see if his letter had been steamed open.

Mary Randall might be the whole show. The gent with the bum ear might have been a henchman of hers, not Crowley's. The words he mumbled while dying could have been in delirium. The telegraph agent could deny he had said a word. Gil realized he hadn't a shred of evidence that wouldn't need the testimony of a dead man.

When he judged he was nearing Big Coulee he looked back. Perhaps half a mile behind him, silhouetted for a moment on a ridge, a lone rider appeared, then dipped again into darkness. The big rustler hunter flicked Slumberheels with the spurs.

When he reached the mouth of the coulee, he swung the big gelding in and quickly cached him in a clump of redshank. Then he went back to the mouth of the wash and hid in a rock pile, listening subconsciously to the sad night breeze whispering through the chaparral. At the sound of hoofbeats, his gun slid into his hand.

The lone rider wheeled into the coulee mouth and passed within fifteen feet of Norcross' hiding place at a long lope. When Gil saw who it was, he felt a prickly sensation at the roots of his hair. It was a girl in a side-saddle, mounted on a tall palomino. It was too dark to see the girl's face. But the big Association man didn't need to be told who she was.

Quickly getting Slumberheels, Gil let the fleet gelding stretch out till he detected a

faint blur in the darkness ahead, then drew in some.

His first thought was to overtake the girl and demand a showdown. Then it struck him that the girl hadn't hesitated at the coulee mouth. She couldn't possibly have seen his tracks. If she was trailing him, it must be because she knew he would go that way. And if she knew that, his letter had been opened.

A new thought came to him. What if old Moss Goodnight himself were in on the deal! He had known such cases—where a renegade masked his identity by posing as the leader of honest men. Then Norcross got another surprise.

AFTER another mile, the dark blur ahead suddenly vanished. Gil went ahead cautiously. At the mouth of a shallow draw that bore upward to the southwest, the ring of hoofs on rock stopped him. Far up in that draw he heard the dwindling clatter. Mary Randall wasn't on his trail at all. She had sped away on some mysterious trail of her own.

Again, Gil's first notion was to tail her. But he decided against it. In the first place, he'd probably lose her in the darkness. And he was becoming more and more curious to make talk with Moss Goodnight. With the murder of Little Jeff McLeod gnawing at his heart, he pointed Slumberheels west through the coulee.

The rising moon was filling the big yard on the Leaning G with pale white light when he rode in. He spotted a light in a kitchen window, then quirted off a pack of snapping hounds. A long-bearded oldster threw the door wide and came hobbling toward him.

"You Moss Goodnight?" asked Norcross.

"All except one leg," grumbled the old man. "It's second-growth hick'ry, damn it! You're the young whipper-snapper the Association sent, eh?"

"You know a heap of things, verdad?" inquired Gil tartly.

"I tell you easy does it," grumbled old Goodnight, "and Grizzly Pocock, my segundo, slopes in from Tres Pulgas and tells me you started right in to work the town over by killing Mocho Speer, one of my own crew!"

Gil's mind was working like a trip-hammer. "Who told your segundo," he asked casually, "that the gent who shot Speer was me?"

"Hanged if I know!" growled the oldster irritably. He stuck two fingers through his whiskers and gave a shrill whistle.

A lumbering giant of a man lounged from the doorway of a 'dobe bunkhouse and came floundering across the gravel. Gil got a good look at his face in the moonlight—the darkly glowering face of a man born in an ill-humor.

"Grizzly," snapped old Goodnight, "who told you Mocho was shot by Gil Norcross?"

The giant's feet twisted in the gravel. "I disremember, boss," he said sourly. "Reckon I heard it in the Brimstone Bar."

"Light down, young feller," invited old Moss. "We can talk more comfortable inside. Grizzly will look to your sorrel."

As the surly ramrod turned to lead the horse away, Gil caught the evil light in his reddish eyes.

While Moss Goodnight stomped around rustling up some hot coffee, Norcross sized him up in the lamplight, but couldn't make much of him. He was a hawk-visaged old wolf of a man, bony and stooped, with icy buttermilk eyes and a jaw that clamped like a door hinge.

"How come you, Norcross," he snapped, glaring through the steam from his coffee, "to gun down one of my boys?"

"I was coming out of the Chink's," Gil explained, "when this coyote you call 'Speer' threw down on me from behind a tree. I didn't miss."

"Hell's hop-toads!" swore old Moss. "One hombre don't throw down on another for no reason whatever."

"That's puzzling me some too," Gil admitted. "Has this struck you, Goodnight: If nobody knowed I was in town, how come anybody to know Speer was gunned by me?"

Old Moss' faded blue eyes slitted thoughtfully. "I reckon," he growled, "Mocho probably talked some before he cashed in. But if, like you say, you told nobody who you was, how would Mocho know?"

Norcross riveted his steely eyes on the oldster's bearded face. "I told but one person—that was when I asked for my mail."

The old man's white eyelids fluttered. "That's out," he growled. "Miss Mary, she is of the salt of the earth. She come West three-four years back to try and get her kid brother off the booze. Ever since then she has not only shifted for herself but for that weak-kneed brother of hers too. Mary, she is plumb loco over that whiskey-guzzlin' pup, hoping eternally to salvage him from the devil."

"The devil," hazarded Norcross, "being Crowley?"

"Nope," contradicted the oldster. "Duke Crowley won't sell Laury a drop. But let's get down to cases." He shoved his cup aside and stuffed a load of cut-plug into a charred corncob.

"This whole Tres Pulgas Basin is being combed clean of prime cattle by some crew of long-riders we can't even put a finger on," he resumed. "We've had several brushes with the damn wolves, killed two-three vinegaroons nobody recognized—but who in hell the boss lobo is, we don't know."

"It wouldn't be Duke Crowley," inquired Norcross lazily, "or Tom Padway, would it?"

Old Moss Goodnight laughed till the tears ran down into his whiskers. "Hell's hop-toads!" he sputtered. "That lard-barrel of a Crowley would skin you out of your eye teeth in a monte game, but Duke's got his hands full acting as self-appointed Mayor of Tres Pulgas. As for Padway—Tom's meaner'n a cross-eyed scorpion and crookerder'n the hock of a cow, but there ain't enough of him to be a hooter. Besides which, young feller, did I overlook telling you the ramrod of this pack of wolves is a woman!" And at Gil's expression of unbelief he added, "A she woman ridin' a side-saddle!"

Big Gil Norcross had heard of such a thing. But, if true in this case, it was the first time he had encountered it. His thoughts flew to Mary Randall as he had first seen her—coppery hair, smiling lips, and soft hazel eyes. Then he saw her as he had seen her last—flying off to the southwest on a racing palomino, and mounted on a side-saddle. He shook his shaggy head like a cornered bear.

"Got any idea?" he asked, "where these hooters hide out?"

"Not any," grumbled old Moss. "There's been a crew of birds with price tags on their hair up in Bullpine Meadows for several years, but them fellers ain't never bothered us down here in the Basin."

"How would a gent get to Bullpine Meadows?" Gil inquired.

"Full of lead," snapped old Moss. "But if you're plumb sot on it, you can go back to them two cottonwoods with the boulder between and on up over the ridge. That will fetch you down into a shallow draw where there's a trail leadin' off to the southwest."

"The trail Mary Randall was riding!" shot through Gil's mind.

"That trail," went on the oldster, "will fetch you fifteen mile up through the hills smack into Bullpine Meadows. But you won't know it—you'll be cold meat."

GIL plucked his hat off the floor and slid wearily to his feet. "I'll take me a gander up thataway," he said.

"You'll find your crowbait in the barn," grumbled old Moss. "I'll rest my hick'ry leg. See you in hell!"

When Gil stepped down from the veranda, he saw that the bunkhouse was dark. But a dim light shone from the open doorway of the barn. He crossed the moonlit yard warily, hand close to gun butt. Just outside the barn door and to one side, he hesitated and peered in through narrowed eyes. The light came from a smoking lantern hanging from a beam by a wire. Gil realized that once he stepped into that doorway, he would be a perfect target, from both inside and out.

But danger or no danger, the rangy outlaw hunter concluded he couldn't stand there all night. Perhaps, after all, Pocock was on the level. Maybe he had left the light just for convenience, then hit the hay. Gil stepped swiftly through the doorway.

Something that felt like a sledgehammer on a spree crashed against the side of his head. His brain reeled. Fire blazed behind his eyeballs. He fought to get his gun free, but his leaden fingers refused to close on the walnut grips. As he lurched around in falling, his glazing eyes caught a blurred glimpse of the malignant face of the giant Pocock, lying stretched on a beam above the doorway. His hairy hand gripped an axe handle, clubbed for another blow.

Weird figures were spinning in Gil's tortured brain. But out of them all emerged two. One was Little Jeff McLeod. The other—a rounded girlish figure topped by high-piled coppery hair, and with a small, tense face that seemed all hazel eyes. A voice deep within whispered that no matter what the set-up was, little Mary Randall was riding on the brink of hell.

Another thought piled on that one. Gil himself, and he only, could save Mary. Then his lights went out.

He regained his senses in a swirl of pain. He was dimly conscious of a jolting sensation that sent stabs of agony from his head to his toes. Then he found he was lashed crosswise of the saddle on a pony that was

straining up a steep mountain trail. The spicy odor of cedar and fir was heavy in his nostrils.

His thoughts flew to Mary Randall, wondering if she was safe. Then he thought once again of Little Jeff McLeod, and the rage of impotence boiled in his veins. He wondered if he himself was to be killed with a slug in the back, as loyal Little Jeff had been. But his thoughts were curbed by the stopping of his horse.

The rope was cut between his hands and feet and he was dumped head-first on hard ground. He rolled over and tried to sit up, but fell from dizziness. From where he lay he saw a blanket jerked from the mouth of the cave, letting out a flood of yellow light that played over the surly features of Grizzly Pocock towering nearby.

Four men came darting from the cave. In a moment Gil found himself lying stretched inside, with everybody gazing down at him. He calmly surveyed the circle.

One of the outlaws was a big buck-toothed renegade with a black patch where his left eye should have been. Another was a gangling beanpole of a man with a fixed crafty leer. Further away stood a sallow youngster with restless hands and bleary booze-reddened eyes. But it was the leader, called by the others "Cuchillo," who caught Norcross' attention.

He was an undersized little weasel with merciless agate eyes, as bald as a doorknob. The left corner of his mouth was twisted in a permanent grin. When he spoke, it sounded like the scouring of a skillet with sand. He pointed toward the torn flesh and clotted blood on the side of the prisoner's head and face.

"You mighty near overplayed your hand, Grizzly," he rasped. "I want this polecat kept alive. Soon as we get back from making this raid on old Goodnight's beef tonight, I aim to make this polecat write a letter to Santa Fe telling his boss everything's keno. Once a week he can do that. That way, the cockeyed Association won't be sending a man down here every so often to be gut-shot like I done that chuckle-headed Jeff McLeod."

Gil Norcross felt hot blood go surging to his throbbing head. A picture of his murdered saddle-mate flitted across his memory. And there, not ten feet distant, stood the wizened little rat who had planted the slug in Little Jeff's back. Cold rage chilled him. His steely gray eyes stabbed like dagger points at the agate eyes of the grinning little outlaw.

"You dirty little yellow-bellied bushwhacker," he said distinctly. "You're well named—'Cuchillo'—the knife. I will kill you, if it's the last job I do on earth!"

The devil called "Cuchillo" bared shining yellow teeth in a savage snarl. "You got good guts, lawman," he rasped. "But I been killing your kind so long it ain't even a chore." He swung around.

"Pocock," he sneered. "Did you shove them beeves of Goodnight's over toward Crazy Man Creek, like I said, where they'll be easy to get at?"

"Shore 'nough, boss," growled Grizzly, "and drifted them this way."

"We got to get a move on," rasped Cuchillo. He motioned to the others. "You there, Randall and Patch, tie that polecat up so he can't wiggle. We got nobody to spare to stay and guard him. I'll be ready in five minutes. You be ready too. Move!"

THE scrawny little leader ducked outside, followed by Pocock and the beanpole.

"So-o-o!" thought Gil. "The young booze-hound is Laury Randall—Mary's kid brother." He noticed the sallow youngster avoided his eyes.

The two made fast the lashings on Gil's ankles and wrists and stretched him out between opposite bunk supports till his long body was as taut as a fiddle string, then hurried out. A few minutes later came the dying rumble of flying hoofs.

In half an hour Norcross was free. That was merely routine stuff for him. It had been routine ever since he nearly lost his life by being left tied in blistering Borax Sink.

Nobody ever noticed anything different about the boots Norcross wore. But they were different. They were built to order with stiff, heavy horsehide collars three inches wide stitched inside the ankles. No matter how tightly his ankles were bound, he could free himself by gradually working his feet out of his boots. It was painful, but it worked.

Once his feet were free, he found a sharp edge on a bunk rail and began sawing on his wrist lashings. He was puzzled to find that the hoggin' strings had been tied so loosely they almost fell off.

He took precious time to search the cave, but failed to find a gun of any kind. On the far side of the little meadow in front, he discovered a pole corral holding three

mustangs. Expertly fashioning a hackamore from a piece of the rope he had been tied with, he mounted bareback on a stocky bay gelding and shot through the cut leading toward the northeast, where lay Big Coulee and Crazy Man.

He rode like a maniac for Big Coulee, hurling the stout bay recklessly down out of the dark foothills. Two images kept flitting across his mind—the freckled face of Little Jeff McLeod, and the merciless eyes of the devil called "Cuchillo," the fiend who had boasted of having shot Little Jeff in the back.

The idea of riding to the Leaning G for help never even occurred to the racing outlaw hunter. One thought alone boiled in his aching head now—to get his steely fingers on Cuchillo's scrawny throat. He had no gun, not even a saddle. But as he spooked the bay he planned.

He should strike big Coulee just about the time the rustled herd emerged from the dry bed of the Crazy Man. He had a hunch Cuchillo would be bringing up the drag—staying back where trouble would be most likely to occur. And that's exactly the way it was.

Gil was charging down the south slope of Big Coulee when he saw the leaders of a herd of big steers come stringing down the north slope. A human beanpole was riding point.

Gil struck him like an avalanche, horse and all. The hooter went sprawling from his saddle, his head striking a rock with a dull thump! His six-gun flew from his holster and exploded when it struck. Norcross pounced on it and hair-pinned into the saddle of Beanpole's buckskin.

The two riders on the right flank swerved and went spurring up the slope toward a pinon thicket, firing over their shoulders as they rode. The lone rider on the left flank cut straight through the herd and dashed up the slope after them, his carbine crackling. But, to his astonishment, Gil saw clearly by the direction of the carbine flame that the lone rider was firing at his companions! And he knocked them both from their saddles. Then he himself pitched over his horse's head.

Gil whirled. The rider who had been bringing up the drag whipped around the edge of the herd in a dark blur that spat lead. A slug burned past Norcross's ribs. Another nicked an ear. His own six-gun roared. The outlaw leader grabbed wildly for the saddle horn, missed it, and parted company with his mount. Never, so long as he lived, would Gil Norcross forget the sight of that unhorsed figure hurtling through the moonlight, to land with a sickening crunch in a pile of stones. Gil turned his head and covered his eyes with his hand. His throat felt as if someone had shrunk a rawhide band around it.

That hurtling figure was clothed in a woman's riding habit.

Gil couldn't clamp his hand tight enough to shut out the vision that was seething in his brain—a vision of a slim girl with gleaming coppery hair and eyes like still pools beneath motionless willows. The moan that came welling through his clenched teeth helped to cover the pounding of approaching hoofbeats.

Gil jerked his hand away. He was surrounded by breathless riders on horses flecked with foam. He saw old Moss Goodnight drop clumsily from the saddle beside the crumpled figure in the rockpile, then straighten as though he'd been stung by a yellow-jacket.

"I'll be a hick'ry-legged ol' tumblebug!" exploded the oldster. "Lookee here!"

Gil was closest, and though his legs felt like rubber he was the first to reach the limp body old Moss had turned face up.

"Cuchillo!" he gasped.

"Who?" snorted old Moss.

"Cuchillo!" repeated Gil. "Boss lobo of the Bullpine Meadows pack of curly wolves."

"Cuchillo—my grandmother!" snorted old Moss derisively. "That's Tom Padway!"

GIL felt a tiny hand work its way into his. He glanced down. The limpid eyes of Mary Randall were pools of veiled light.

A goggle-eyed fat man waddled up beside old Moss. "When Mary come to me," he muttered, "and spilled the frijoles, just before she and I rode out to your place tonight, Moss, I just couldn't beliéve Padway had been pulling the wool over my eyes for twenty years." He stooped and peered down into Padway's bruised face. "That's Tom Padway," he muttered. "But sure as my moniker's 'Duke Crowley' I'll never believe it."

Mary's tiny fingers tightened round one of Gil's. "Padway forced me to point you out, Gil," she said, with a catch in her voice, "by threatening to have Laury hung for the murder of Jeff McLeod. Then, after I'd done it, I knew I couldn't do such a

thing to you, not even to save Laury from a hang-noose. So I told 'Uncle Crow' and he dusted out to the Leaning G to try to head you off."

"Soon as I got wind of all this," cut in old Moss, "I smelled me some skunk close to home and went lookin' for Grizzly Pocock. When I couldn't locate hide nor hair of him, we all started hell-bent for Bullpine Meadows. That's how we come to be crossin' the coulee when the fireworks started."

"Little Jeff McLeod was the best friend I ever had, Mary," Gil said quietly. "Laury didn't kill him. That lump of buzzard bait lying there bushwhacked Little Jeff. He boasted of it."

Mary gave a glad little cry, then instantly sobered. "Gil," she whispered brokenly, "did—did—?"

"You all stand hitched a minute," Gil told them.

He wobbled across the coulee and knelt down in the shadow of a sumach bush. Laury Randall looked up at him with fevered eyes.

"You Gil Norcross?" he asked weakly.

"Yes, amigo," Gil said.

"Sis rode out to the hideout this evening," the youngster went on, "trying to get me away and wanting the riding habit and side saddle I stole from her when Padway craved a good disguise and cut off my whiskey money till I kicked in." He choked then went on.

"Sis said you were her man. I laughed that off with my face—but not in my heart. That's how come I tied your wrists so loose. When the shooting started, I figured it must be you, so I done what I was able." His head fell back limply over Gil's arm. "Norcross," he whispered. "You be kind to Mary!"

"Depend on that, amigo," Gil told him hoarsely.

Norcross climbed the slope and made sure Grizzly Pocock and "Patch" were dead. Then he rejoined the others and laid young Larry Randall's body gently on the ground.

"Mebbyso it's better this way," he muttered. "But if Laury hadn't sided me in this fight tonight, I'd be where he is."

MARY was gazing down wide-eyed on her brother. Gil swung on Crowley. "One thing's puzzling me some, Crowley," he said. "Mocho Speer's dying words was—'He was chain lightnin', Crowley.' How do you account for that?"

Duke Crowley's jowls quivered. "I was forever guying that tramp," he admitted, "telling him that on the draw he was slower'n a cow pulling her foot out of a bog. Reckon it preyed on his mind."

But Mary Randall had had enough. She reeled against big Gil Norcross's shoulder. He picked her up, stepped into the saddle, and with Mary cradled gently in his arms headed at a walk for the Leaning G.

I TALKED WITH GOD

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 720-11, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 720-11, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

A SMASHING COW-COUNTRY THRILLER OF AN OWLHOOTER WHO DREW LAST AND TRIGGERED FIRST!

Bardell screamed and slid backwards, over his horse's rump.

DRYGULCHERS CAN'T QUIT!

by I. L. THOMPSON

The golden eagles earned in his last shoot-out would have hired a medico to remove the bullet that was speeding the Cheyenne Kid to an unmarked grave . . . but the Kid gave the money to the tragedy-ridden son of the man he was paid to kill!

NO ONE spoke to the tall, gaunt rider on the long-legged dun mare as man and horse came slowly along the muddy, rutted main street of Mesita. The Cheyenne Kid smiled bitterly. He knew what invoked the fear, the distrust and contempt on the faces of men when they looked at him. He knew he wore the brand of killer in his hard, expressionless gray eyes, in the relentless, immobile lines around his thin, gashed lips.

A little while ago, when he had ridden through Sun Pass and looked down on Signal Valley, green and jewel-like under the glory of a great, misty rainbow, he had felt a thrill of homecoming. It came to him then that perhaps this, his home range, could be a haven for him where he could

settle down and forget about those lonely, blood-drenched years on the border trails where the Cheyenne Kid and his gun, for sale to the highest bidder, had carved for themselves a sinister fame.

But then he looked down at his tied gun, a reminder of his mission here. And he realized that there could never be any peace for him in Signal Valley if he persisted in going through with the job ahead. And go through with it he must, or die.

Now, Cheyenne's lips curled in sardonic self-ridicule. No matter what he did or didn't do, he couldn't live down his past. He'd been a fool to think even for a moment that because a certain night of gun-flame and death at San Carlos had changed him so that his own mother wouldn't have recognized him, he could fool the men of Signal Valley—live among them as one of their own kind.

In a way, he could fool them. No one would recognize the white-haired Cheyenne Kid, with the puckered scars which had changed the modeling of his lean face, and the useless, crippled left hand. They wouldn't know he was the same Dan Clayton who had ridden out of this valley eight years ago just two jumps ahead of a law posse. A wild young kid who'd gotten drunk and killed a cheating, tinhorn gambler in a saloon brawl.

NO, THEY wouldn't know him. But they'd know he was a killer. And they'd hate him. Even if he didn't go through with the gun-job that waited for him here in Mesita.

He'd gone a long way since he had left Signal Valley. Until three years ago he'd been Dan Clayton, an outlaw with a bounty price on his head. At San Carlos, Dan Clayton had disappeared, so far as the world was concerned, and the Cheyenne Kid was born in his stead. A man with a new face and a new reputation. The law couldn't touch the Cheyenne Kid. A hired gunman, he always drew last and triggered first.

He'd killed a lot of men. Most of them had deserved killing. But there were times when Cheyenne had to send good men to Boothill—wild youngsters who sought glory by facing his guns, earnest lawmen who pursued him with the zeal of crusaders.

Sometimes the voices and the faces of those dead men came stealing into his dreams. But folks didn't know that. They called him inhuman, a born killer. They would have laughed if anyone told them the Cheyenne Kid was tired of handing out one-way tickets to Boothill.

Cheyenne shrugged his broad shoulders resignedly as he racked his bronc in front of the Paradise Saloon. He told himself he didn't give a damn, he'd known all along that he couldn't lay aside his gun. He told himself he'd go crazy, living the tame kind of life these ranchers and cowpokes lived.

The Cheyenne Kid told himself that, but just before he batted through the wing doors of the Paradise, he stared down the street at a smiling rancher who was helping his slim, clear-eyed wife on to the high seat of a buckboard. Cradled in the woman's arms was a tiny, curly-headed button, laughing up at his mother.

That childish laughter seemed to do something to the Cheyenne Kid. If a passer-by had looked at his eyes now, he would have seen that they weren't hard, expressionless. They were soft, almost wistful.

A spasm of purely physical pain flashed across Cheyenne's face and he turned away abruptly, strode into the smoke-dim interior of the Paradise. His eyes were alert, stone-hard now, his mouth grim. He couldn't step out of his role of killer yet. For he must get relief from the dull ache along his spine, where lead from a lawman's gun had lodged and was poisoning his system, slowly killing him. There was a man in Mesita who would pay him for a gun job he wanted done, pay him enough so that Cheyenne could go to a specialist in Chicago and have that crippling slug cut out of his back.

It had to be done, the Kid knew, remembering the warning of a medico in Mesa City. "I'll give you approximately six months to live if that irritation isn't removed within the next few weeks," the doctor had told him a month ago. "Once the infection becomes widespread, it means your finish."

THE office was blue with cigar smoke. Through that pungent haze, the Cheyenne Kid stared coldly at Rance Bardell, proprietor of the Paradise. He didn't like Bardell's shifty, slitted eyes. He didn't like the contemptuous, sneering smile that wreathed the man's big face whenever he spoke of the nesters and small ranchers of Signal Valley. The look of the man and the way he wore his guns told Cheyenne that Rance Bardell was a killer, the kind who carved notches on his sixes and whose dreams were never troubled by the ghosts

of the men his guns had sent to Boothill.

"You sent for me," Cheyenne said imperturbably.

Bardell's cruel lips spread in a grin. "Three years ago, an outlaw, Dan Clayton, pulled a job down in San Carlos. Folks say he died that night, but I know different. A Mex friend of mine, Juan Flores, nursed Clayton back to life. Clayton became the Cheyenne Kid. Me, I been wantin' you on my payroll ever since that San Carlos job, Kid. Six notches for yore gun—all in ten minutes of shootin'. Cripes! That was—"

"Exactly what d'you want done, Bardell?" The Cheyenne Kid's voice was like a breeze off a snow-field, and his pale eyes flamed with greenish lights. It disturbed him that Bardell knew his real identity. And he wasn't proud of the San Carlos affair. He wanted to forget the men who had gone down before his guns that night. And, as always, cold hate seethed within him as he thought of the trusted partner who had deserted him, left him to face the law guns alone.

Rance Bardell's eyes narrowed, and the dark blood mounted to his face at Cheyenne's rebuff. He studied the gunman's still face, noted the way he wore his single, thonged six-shooter. Then he relaxed.

"I know you don't hire out to kill decent men, Kid," he began. "You can rest easy that the two hombres I want out of the way are the kind that deserve to die. One of them is Ripley Posson, a tinhorn gambler and gunman who owns the Oro Grande Saloon here in town. He's tryin' to run me outa business, figgerin' there's room for only one saloon in Mesita—his.

"Him and his brother, Jack, have already gunned two of my house gamblers. I'm next in line. But I wouldn't have a chance against Ripley Posson. He's too fast on the draw."

Cheyenne's face remained immobile. "And the other man you want annihilated, is it this Jack Posson?" he drawled.

Bardell shook his head. "No. He's a weaklin'. He won't go on fightin' me after his gunhawk brother is dead."

Bardell pinched his cigar between thumb and fingers, studied it with veiled eyes. "I own a ranch here. One of my neighbors is givin' me trouble. Since I killed a friend of his in a fair fight, he's been tryin' to frame me. Keeps shootin' off his mouth, accusin' me and my riders of the rustlin' that goes on here in the valley.

"He's got influence here. I want him shut up for good before he gets some of his hot-head friends to form a vigilance committee and come callin' for me with a lynch-noose."

The Cheyenne Kid eyed Rance Bardell somberly as the man held a match to his cold cigar. Cheyenne didn't like the job ahead. He was tired of the sound of dying voices in his ears, the sight of pain-contorted faces flitting through his dreams. Rance Bardell's figure blurred suddenly before him, cleared. Cheyenne's face remained wooden, not hinting at the shaky, sick feeling inside him. It was the old, familiar pain again. The Cheyenne Kid's eyes hardened. Now was no time to be squeamish. What the hell difference would two more ghosts make anyhow—?"

"I'll take the job," he told Bardell. "It'll cost you three thousand bucks—in advance."

Bardell snorted incredulously. "Yo're a robber, man!" he snapped. "I'll get somebody else—"

"One of yore own men?" Cheyenne said smoothly. "What if he's caught and yore name is dragged into the mess? Me, I never bungle a job, and I never get caught."

Bardell scowled. Resentment smoldered in his eyes. But Cheyenne had a feeling that the man wasn't particularly displeased. "Okay, Kid," he said quickly. Too quickly. The Cheyenne Kid felt a warning stir inside his brain. Bardell was not to be trusted, he told himself.

"This hombre's name is Doc Mackay. He—"

Cheyenne didn't hear the rest of what Bardell was saying. At mention of that name he had gone white, tense. Doc Mackay—Bardell wanted him to kill Doc Mackay, the man who had been Tumbleweed Smith, Cheyenne's partner. The man who'd deserted him, run out on him that bloody night at San Carlos. The Cheyenne Kid knew Doc Mackay was Tumbleweed Smith, because he'd found out that his ex-partner had shown briefly in the border towns. He had turned straight, was back at his old profession of doctoring, and he was going by the name of Mackay.

Cheyenne almost laughed aloud. Killing the medico would be a pleasure! In a single, lithe movement, he leaned forward, scooped up the bank notes that Bardell had placed on the desk.

"Where will I find Mackay?" he said quickly, eagerness sharpening his voice.

Bardell frowned. "Hold on, Kid," he

rasped. "I want Ripley Posson out of the way first. Mackay rode over to Sagetown on business today. He won't be at his ranch until tonight. Ripley Posson will be riding into Mesita along about sundown, as usual. Get him, then go after Mackay."

DURING the afternoon, sullen, massed clouds gathered for a downpour. Through a rift in those clouds, a setting sun was sending shafts of crimson light over the prairie like trailing bloody fingers when the Cheyenne Kid faced Ripley Posson in front of the Oro Grande Saloon.

The Cheyenne Kid felt no qualm of misgiving, no regret as lead from his bucking gun brought Posson down. The evil-eyed, gun-swift gambler was of a breed he knew well. The same treacherous, ruthless killer-breed as Rance Bardell. Cheyenne watched the man pitch to the boardwalk, then turned to go.

"Dirty killer!"

The Cheyenne Kid turned inscrutable eyes on the man who darted out of the Oro Grande to run to Posson's huddled figure. Cheyenne saw another Ripley Posson, and knew that this was the dead gambler's brother, Jack.

He waited, but Jack Posson made no move for his gun. Fear matched the hate flaring in his beady eyes. Cheyenne moved away as onlookers closed in to stare at death.

He went to the livery and got his dun mare. Lightning split the cloud-black dusk and thunder muttered, grew into an earth-shaking cannonading as he rode out of town, followed Angel Creek northward. Cheyenne stared ahead, to where low, crumpled hills melted into the murky sky. He was on his way to Doc Mackay's Three in a Box spread. A chill eagerness seethed inside him as he thought of the coming showdown.

His face was calm as he rode along, but his mind was in a turmoil. He was remembering that night, three years ago, when his partner, Tumbleweed Smith, who was now Doc Mackay, had double-crossed him.

He made a disgusted sound deep in his throat, remembering how he'd trusted Tumbleweed. He had told himself his partner was too square and honest for the owlhoot. Tumbleweed had been a medico before circumstantial evidence railroaded him into a prison term for a robbery he didn't commit.

Cheyenne had met him after Tumbleweed's release from Yuma. The two of them teamed up. Their dark trail partnership was seven months old on the night they rode into San Carlos. The Cheyenne Kid had been Dan Clayton, outlaw, then.

They lost a lot of money in a crooked game at Dice Gunther's notorious Gold Palace gambling-hell. When they called Gunther for cheating, three house gamblers stuck guns in their backs and threw them out of the place. Tumbleweed blamed Dan for their predicament.

"We had enough money to quit outlawing," he complained. "But you talked me into having one more fling, buying drinks and bucking a game at Gunther's. Now we're broke."

"Stop beefin'," Dan had said. "We'll get it back."

That night they climbed through a window into the office of the Gold Palace. Dan's educated fingers opened the safe. Tumbleweed was stuffing the loot into a burlap sack when a door burst open and Dice Gunther appeared with a scattergun.

Dan Clayton's first shot brought him down. Then hell broke loose. Men came running. Gunther, firing from the floor, kept Dan busy until the building was surrounded. Tumbleweed wasn't much help in the melee that followed. Guntalk always scared him stiff, made him too paralyzed to shoot straight. Dan fought like a demon. Again and again his own particular brand of Apache warwhoop flung defiance at the besiegers.

Suddenly, he missed his partner. Tumbleweed was gone. So was the bag of loot. Dan ran to a side window in time to see his partner, mounted, flash past and disappear down an alley. Lone-handed, wounded, Dan fought on, cursing Tumbleweed's infamy. He was halfway out of a window when somebody brought the muzzle of a shotgun down across his knuckles with a bone-splintering crash.

With the broken hand dangling useless at his left side, he ran a hot-lead gauntlet to his horse. Hours later, weak from half a dozen wounds, he fell from his blood-soaked kak. He would have died out there in the hills if Juan Flores, a Mexican goat herder, hadn't found him and nursed him back to life.

Now, as he rode away from Mesita, the Cheyenne Kid looked down at his maimed left hand, a hand that was twisted, crippled permanently. Never again would it hold a gun. That brought down Cheyenne's chances for a long life just exactly half. And that

wasn't all. He couldn't hold his bronc's reins with that hand. He couldn't feed himself with it or pull on his clothes. He couldn't do a damned thing with it. Cheyenne would never get over the humiliation of being partially helpless. He had been a two-gunman. Now he carried one gun. And he was a cripple.

With all the bitterness in him, he cursed Tumbleweed Smith. If Tumbleweed hadn't left him to fight his way out alone, this wouldn't have happened. Two of them could have held the lawmen off so that they would never have gotten in close enough for hand-to-hand fighting. Cheyenne would have a strong left hand instead of a withered, nerveless thing that was worse than no hand at all. And if Tumbleweed hadn't run off with the money, Cheyenne would have plenty for that operation he needed on his back without earning it all over again with blood and lead.

He chuckled mirthlessly as he thought how nearly Tumbleweed had come to escaping his vengeance-dealing gun. Cheyenne had been on the lookout for Tumbleweed for three long years. Now, by a lucky accident, he knew where to find him, could settle the score between them. It seemed that fate was stepping in to help him play this sinister game.

The Cheyenne Kid hipped in his saddle, peered along his backtrail, listening. Then he faced around. It was thunder, not hoofbeats he'd heard, he decided.

The roar of gunfire came from behind. Cheyenne, jerked upright in the kak by a slug between his shoulder-blades, twisted around to face his ambusher. Dropping the reins, he snatched his gun free of leather, sent lead crashing at a moving shadow back there in the brush fringing the creek.

"Jack Posson," he muttered. "Followed me to collect for his brother's killin'."

A cry of pain indicated he had struck a flesh-and-blood target. The dim bulk of a horse and rider plunged into the trail, hurtled back toward town. Flame streaked the night as the rider sent lead crashing at Cheyenne.

Cheyenne's bronc was bolting now. The Cheyenne Kid couldn't reach the reins he'd dropped. He couldn't do anything but hang on to all the leather he could find, to keep from falling off. The jolting sickened him. He wanted to fall in the trail and lie there, anything to stop the agony which held him, but instead, he clung to the kak, his face gray with pain.

He lost track of time, distance. Lightning danced in crazy arcs before his dimming eyes. Then the rain came. Presently Cheyenne felt himself plunging down into thick blackness. Mud oozed against his face, squeezed up between his outstretched fingers. Then he no longer felt the cold, the wet. He didn't feel anything.

THE Cheyenne Kid opened his eyes. A straight furrow of perplexity divided his forehead as he stared around the room. His chest was one big ache, and he felt weak as a kitten. Dimly he remembered an endless interlude of pain and darkness.

He saw the girl, then. A pretty, bright-haired girl with eyes as blue as a summer sky. She smiled. Cheyenne's stern lips softened a little, and a strange new warmth seemed to flow around his heart, driving out some of the coldness bred there by hate and contempt.

"You'll be all right now," the girl said in a low, pleasant voice. "My husband found you out on our east range, with a bullet wound in your lung. He operated, cut out the bullet. That was nearly a week ago."

The warmth receded from around Cheyenne's heart. His face changed. "Yore husband?" he whispered. "Is he a doc?"

"Yes. Doctor Jim Mackay. I'm Nancy Mackay."

Cheyenne's eyes flamed. He wasn't going to accept help—any more help—from Doc Mackay. He must get out of here. He tried to sit up, but savage pain and an overpowering weakness chained him. The girl came quickly to his side, laid a firm hand on his shoulder.

"You must not move like that," she said urgently. "You might open the wound."

"I can't stay here," Cheyenne muttered, not looking at her. "I'm ridin' on."

Nancy Mackay frowned at him as she would at a wilful child. "You're staying," she said. "If you tried to leave now, you'd die of hemorrhage, or maybe get pneumonia. Please don't argue. I won't leave this room until you drop off to sleep."

The Cheyenne Kid turned his face to the wall. He knew he was too weak to get out of bed without assistance. It was a hell of a situation, being here in Doc Mackay's house, but he'd have to make the best of it.

The next time Cheyenne awoke, he felt a little stronger. He wondered how long he had been asleep, but he didn't ask Nancy Mackay about that. Strangely enough, he

was content to lie there and watch this vibrant, tanned ranch girl come and go as she moved about her work. Once she led a shy, tow-headed button into the room. She told Cheyenne the button was her son, Jimmy Mackay. It wasn't until Jimmy stumbled against a chair that the Cheyenne Kid realized that the boy was blind.

As the days passed, Cheyenne cursed more and more the fate which kept him here. Hell, if he stayed much longer, obediently swallowing the things Nancy Mackay brought him to eat, following her and the button with his eyes every time they came into the room, he might go soft. He might forget that Mackay was a double-crosser and must pay a double-crosser's price.

The Cheyenne Kid told the Mackays his name was Tex. They accepted that without comment, asked him no questions. He saw very little of Doc Mackay. Mackay was a typical, harassed country doctor, worn and tired from overwork and insufficient sleep. But it was something more than overwork which was etching those haggard, bitter lines around the young medico's grim lips, Cheyenne decided. Doc Mackay was terribly worried about something. His wife was worried too. More than once, Cheyenne noticed a discouraged droop to her sensitive mouth, the suspicion of tears in her blue eyes.

The Cheyenne Kid was relieved to see that Mackay didn't recognize him. That would come later, he told himself grimly, when Mackay would find himself looking into the muzzle of Cheyenne's forty-five. Sometimes Cheyenne would be thinking about that when young Jimmy came into the room and grinned at him. Then Cheyenne would feel guilty and ashamed, in spite of himself. He liked the kid a hell of a lot.

And Jimmy liked him too. Whenever the button listened to Cheyenne's voice, there was a light of adoration in his small face that made the Cheyenne Kid ache with regret of the kind of a life he had led—a life which set him apart from people like Nancy Mackay and Jimmy.

Then, one night Cheyenne awoke to hear low voices beyond a closed door.

"I can't get a loan anywhere," Doc Mackay was saying. "I've got no security to offer. The ranch is mortgaged to the hilt now."

Cheyenne heard a chair scrape back, heard footsteps pacing back and forth, then Mackay's voice again.

"I tell you, it's driving me crazy, Nance. One thousand dollars would pay for an operation that would make my boy see. One thousand—and I'm not man enough to get hold of it. I'm a failure.

"If I weren't, I'd be a successful surgeon now, with a big hospital back East. I'd be the kind of a surgeon who could operate on Jimmy and make him well. But all I am is a kind of glorified horse doctor, a dumb pill-thrower. I can't even earn a decent living for you and the boy. You'd be better off without me. You were getting along all right when you had that lunchroom job in town, before you married me—"

"Jim, stop it!" Nancy Mackay protested sharply. "Is it your fault if most of your patients are too poor to pay their bills? Is it your fault that Rance Bardell and his rustler crew are making all of us ranchers poor? Don't worry about the thousand, Jim. We'll get it, somehow—sometime."

"Sometime may be too late," Doc Mackay muttered. "If we wait too long, maybe the boy's eyes will be injured beyond repair. I'm going to get that money right away. I know a way to get it—"

"No, Jim," Nancy Mackay's voice cut in. "You promised you'd never step outside the law again. If anything should happen to you—I couldn't stand it. I love you so, Jim. I need you. And Jimmy needs you—"

THE Cheyenne Kid pulled the covers over his ears, but Nancy Mackay's voice seemed to vibrate through his brain ceaselessly, over and over: "I love you so, Jim—"

A fiery pain licked across Cheyenne's back. It was the old trouble again. That lawman's slug, killing him. Cheyenne told himself he couldn't put off that operation much longer. Maybe it was too late, even now, to hope for a cure. He sat up. When his head cleared, he got out of bed, pulled on his clothes. He would leave now. He told himself he would have left long before this if he'd been able. It had been intolerable being in the same house with the Mackays. But neither Nancy Mackay's kindness nor the fact that Doc Mackay had saved Cheyenne's life was going to change the Kid's plans any.

The Cheyenne Kid would show no mercy. Doc Mackay hadn't given a damn what

happened to the Cheyenne Kid that night of gunflame and death in San Carlos!

Cheyenne told himself he was going to kill Doc Mackay. But not in front of Nancy Mackay and the button. Tonight, Cheyenne would ride into town. Tomorrow, when Mackay came to open up his office in Mesita, Cheyenne would meet him in a fair fight. Fair, but he knew how it would end. It would take a better man than Doc Mackay to match his gun-speed.

The Cheyenne Kid slipped outside and saddled his long-legged dun. He felt lightheaded, unsteady. Once in the kak, he reined southward through the night. His face was drawn, white. There was a great longing in him to get this gun-job over with so he could ride away—far from the legend of the Cheyenne Kid. With some of the money Bardell had given him he'd pay for that operation. Then he would hole up somewhere in the everlasting hills and live out the rest of his life in peace and contentment.

Against the glitter of the stars, he seemed suddenly to see the faces of Nancy Mackay and little Jimmy. All the long way into town he kept seeing them. And before the lights of Mesita emerged from the darkness, he knew beyond doubt that he couldn't make himself go through with the killing of Doc Mackay. Even though he hated the man.

"I hope Bardell blasts him to hell," he murmured through tight lips. "But me, if I gunned him I'd never have any peace, knowin' Nancy Mackay and the kid hated me—"

It was past midnight when the Cheyenne Kid stepped into Rance Bardell's office. The big owner of the Paradise waited in silence for him to speak, his slitted eyes measuring, studying his visitor.

Cheyenne took a roll of bills out of his pocket, threw the greenbacks on Bardell's desk. "Here's fifteen hundred bucks, half of what you paid me," he said. "I'm not killin' Mackay."

Bardell's eyes burned with tawny fires. "I know why you ain't goin' through with the job," he drawled. "You've gone soft because Mackay patched you up."

Sitting there behind his desk, with shoulders hunched forward, the saloonman looked like some big, lithe cat tensing for a pounce. "When I heard you was hurt, I decided the Mackay job couldn't wait until you got well," he went on. "I made other plans to get rid of the medico—plans that will go through tonight. There's a mass meeting here in town tomorrow and I don't want Mackay to be there with his vigilante talk—"

Bardell's arm moved from behind the desk. In his hand was a gun, leveled at Cheyenne. "I decided to get rid of you at the same time," he told Cheyenne smoothly. "I was goin' to send you to Boothill anyway, after you finished off Posson and the medico. But after you got shot up, I decided neither job could wait. I figgered to ride out to Mackay's and kill you both.

"But since you've blundered in here, I'll accommodate you right now."

The Cheyenne Kid's eyes glittered, green and strange. His voice came like the crackling of ice. "So you planned a double-cross all along, Bardell. And you lied about Mackay. He wasn't framin' you. He's been tellin' the truth. You're the kingpin back of the rustlin' here in the valley."

Bardell's teeth gleamed white in the lamplight. "That's correct, Kid," he chuckled. "I'll get back the money I paid you, all of it. And when I show the law it's the outlaw Dan Clayton I've killed, I'll get the five thousand in bounty money on yore head—"

Cheyenne's eyes burned into Bardell's. "Don't pull trigger, polecat," he warned. "I can guarantee to kill you before I pass in my checks."

Uncertainty flickered for a moment in Rance Bardell's eyes. His thumb, hooked over the gun hammer preparatory to cocking it, relaxed for an instant.

Then, abruptly, he let the gun drop, and his hands jerked up, palms forward. For, magically, there was a gun in Cheyenne's hand now, its muzzle pointed at the third button on Bardell's ornate shirt. Cheyenne came forward, leathering his gun as he came. He picked up the weapon Bardell had dropped.

"Stand up, hombre," he ordered.

Bardell stood. The Cheyenne Kid shoved the weapon into the saloonman's holster, then backed away.

"All right, double-crosser," he said, smiling grimly. "Draw that cutter, and we'll see who sends who to Boothill."

BARDELL'S lips went white. He made no move for his six-shooter. Hope and desperation warred in his eyes as footsteps sounded on the stairway.

"Draw!" Cheyenne snapped viciously.

Bardell's hand slapped leather. At the same time he leaped aside to crouch behind his desk. And then gun-thunder filled the room. Lead whipped past the Cheyenne Kid from behind, and he whirled, saw a table-lookout standing in the doorway, squinting at him along the barrel of a scattergun. Bardell, sheltered behind the desk, was triggering now. One leap took Cheyenne to the side window. He scrambled out onto the low roof, dropped off the edge to the ground.

That exertion opened the wound in his chest. He could feel the wetness of the bandages. Feeling faint, he stumbled along the alley toward Main street. A few buildings to the left was the livery, where he'd left his horse. Cheyenne turned on Main street. He coughed, wiped blood from his lips. Weakness surged over him and he sank back against a shadowed wall.

He looked up as the soft clop clop of hoofs came along the moonlit street. Four riders drew up. Grim-looking men with hats low-drawn over their whiskered faces. Racking their broncs in front of the Paradise, they sat their saddles in silence, their hard-eyed glances fixed on the saloon batwings.

The doors swung open, and Rance Bardell strode out, his big face a-scowl. Turning to the gun-hung individual who was following him, he issued a swift order.

"Clayton has sneaked out of town by now. He'll probably hit for Apache Pass," Cheyenne heard him say. "Get some of the boys and head him off. And don't bring him back alive."

The man topped a horse and hurtled away.

"Let's get goin'," Bardell snapped at the riders waiting at the hitchrack.

Cheyenne watched him mount, lead the four men out of town. He saw them turn northward into the Angel Creek road, heading for Doc Mackay's ranch. He smiled grimly. Bardell would kill Mackay. Cheyenne told himself he was glad.

On lagging feet, he went and got his horse. As he rode out of town, he felt of the money in his pocket, and the bulk of it reassured him. He looked off to the west. There lay his gateway to freedom. Sun Pass, far to the west of the spot where the gunman-posse would be seeking him. He sighed. Now he could have that slug cut out of his back. Then he'd put away his gun forever and forget the men he had killed.

The Cheyenne Kid bowed his head. Could he ever forget those hollow-eyed ghosts? And could he ever forget young Jimmy Mackay, with his wide, sightless eyes? Or Nancy Mackay's earnest voice telling her husband how much she loved him?

Cheyenne tried not to look down the road that Bardell and his men had taken. The distant pounding of hoofs was like a dirge in his ears. In a little while now, those killers would ride up to the Three in a Box. They'd call Mackay to the door, then they'd blast him. And Mackay's wife, his kid—would even they be safe from a callous devil like Bardell? Certainly not if they resisted him, Cheyenne knew.

But even if Bardell left them unmolested, what then? If Mackay died, the light of happiness would be gone from Nancy Mackay's eyes forever. She and Jimmy loved the medico. Nothing could change that. Cheyenne groaned deep in his throat. There was one way to insure the happiness of that clear-eyed girl and her little blind kid. The way of no-return—for Cheyenne.

He pulled up abruptly. For a moment he sat there, brooding. Then he wheeled his bronc, galloped after the five gunmen. Presently he turned off the road, took a short cut across the hills to the Three in a Box.

THE Cheyenne Kid stood in the shadow of a tall cottonwood and looked across at Doc Mackay's little ranch cabin, peaceful in the moonlight. There was a soft, dreamy light in Cheyenne's eyes, a light that vanished as he heard hoofbeats. When Rance Bardell and his men rode up, Cheyenne walked out to meet them.

"This is my party, Bardell," he rasped. "Come and get it!"

Bardell ripped out a startled oath, clawed at his holsters. "Get him, boys!" he yelled. "Get the dirty—"

The roar of Cheyenne's gun cut him short. One of the horsebackers turned tail, spurred away in a panic. When Bardell screamed, slid backward over his bronc's rump and crashed to the ground, a second gunman, triggering a pair of wild shots at Cheyenne, laid low on his kak pommel and quirted his bronc back the way he had come.

The third gunnie was pouring a hail of lead at Cheyenne. Cheyenne staggered as a hot slug tore at his hip and another

ploughed through his shoulder. His lips writhed back and a yell of defiance burst from him. His own particular brand of Apache war whoop, trademark of Dan Clayton, outlaw.

Then he felt the smashing impact of a slug in his chest. Bardell had triggered that shot, was up on one knee, blood pouring from his neck. The Cheyenne Kid, sagging slowly, felt his gun buck twice more. Bardell's companion sprawled on the ground in an inert heap. Bardell stiffened, toppled backward. Cheyenne saw the big gunman's face in the moonlight, the expression of hate and surprise on it. He saw the oozing bullet-hole between the staring eyes as Bardell crashed to earth.

Cheyenne was on the ground now, too. He couldn't see very well. He heard voices, footsteps. Then they were standing over him—Doc Mackay, Nancy and Jimmy. There was terror, grief in the button's face as he knelt, groped for Cheyenne's hand.

"Are yuh hurt bad—Tex?" Jimmy gulped, his small hand trembling in Cheyenne's big one.

The Cheyenne Kid managed to sit up. He saw Doc Mackay staring at him. "That Apache yell," Doc stammered. "I'd know it anywhere. You—you're Dan Clayton."

Nancy Mackay's face was white, tear-stained. "Carry him into the house," she implored.

Cheyenne shook his head. "I got to be goin'," he said. "There's a posse after me—"

He got to his feet, went over to his tied horse. Doc Mackay followed him. Cheyenne heard the medico's voice, telling him what a fine thing he'd done. That made a bitter smile curl the Kid's lips.

"Yeah?" he said for Doc's ears alone. "I done this for yore wife and kid. I wouldn't give you a drink in Hades after the way you double-crossed me in San Carlos—lit out with the money that was half mine—"

Doc Mackay grasped his arm. "Hell, Dan! I didn't run away with the money. Before I crawled through that window I threw the sack aside. I was scared. That's why I ran. I admit I was a damned coward, Dan. I always was, when the guns began to talk. You know that—"

Cheyenne, in the kak now, looked down at the medico, smiled wanly. He was glad, very glad he hadn't let Doc Mackay be killed. No one but the devil himself would punish a man for being afraid, he told himself.

"It's okay, partner," he murmured. "It might have happened to anybody. I'm sorry I judged you wrong. I should've known you didn't take the money."

As in a dream, Cheyenne felt Nancy Mackay's gentle fingers on his arm, heard Jimmy sobbing, pleading with him to stay. But he knew he couldn't stay, and he knew he'd never be coming back. He leaned down and put a kindly hand on Jimmy's tow head.

"Don't fret, button," he said huskily. "I'll see you again—someday. Just now the hills are callin' me."

Out of his pocket, Cheyenne pulled the money he had collected from Bardell, fifteen hundred dollars. "This's for Jimmy, to make his eyes well again," he said, handing the money to Doc Mackay.

The medico's face looked bewildered in moonlight. He protested, but Cheyenne was adamant. The medico gripped Cheyenne's hand hard then, and his eyes showed the gratitude that he couldn't express in words. The Cheyenne Kid wheeled the dun mare, rode away. Soft on the breeze he could hear Nancy Mackay's goodbye. "God bless you, Tex," he heard her say.

THE Cheyenne Kid forgot his pain. The suggestion of a smile touched his stern lips. He had no regrets. His smile deepened. He was thinking of the gratitude in Doc Mackay's eyes, the gentleness of Nancy Mackay's goodbye. And he was thinking of a little, blind button who would some day come out of the darkness into the light.

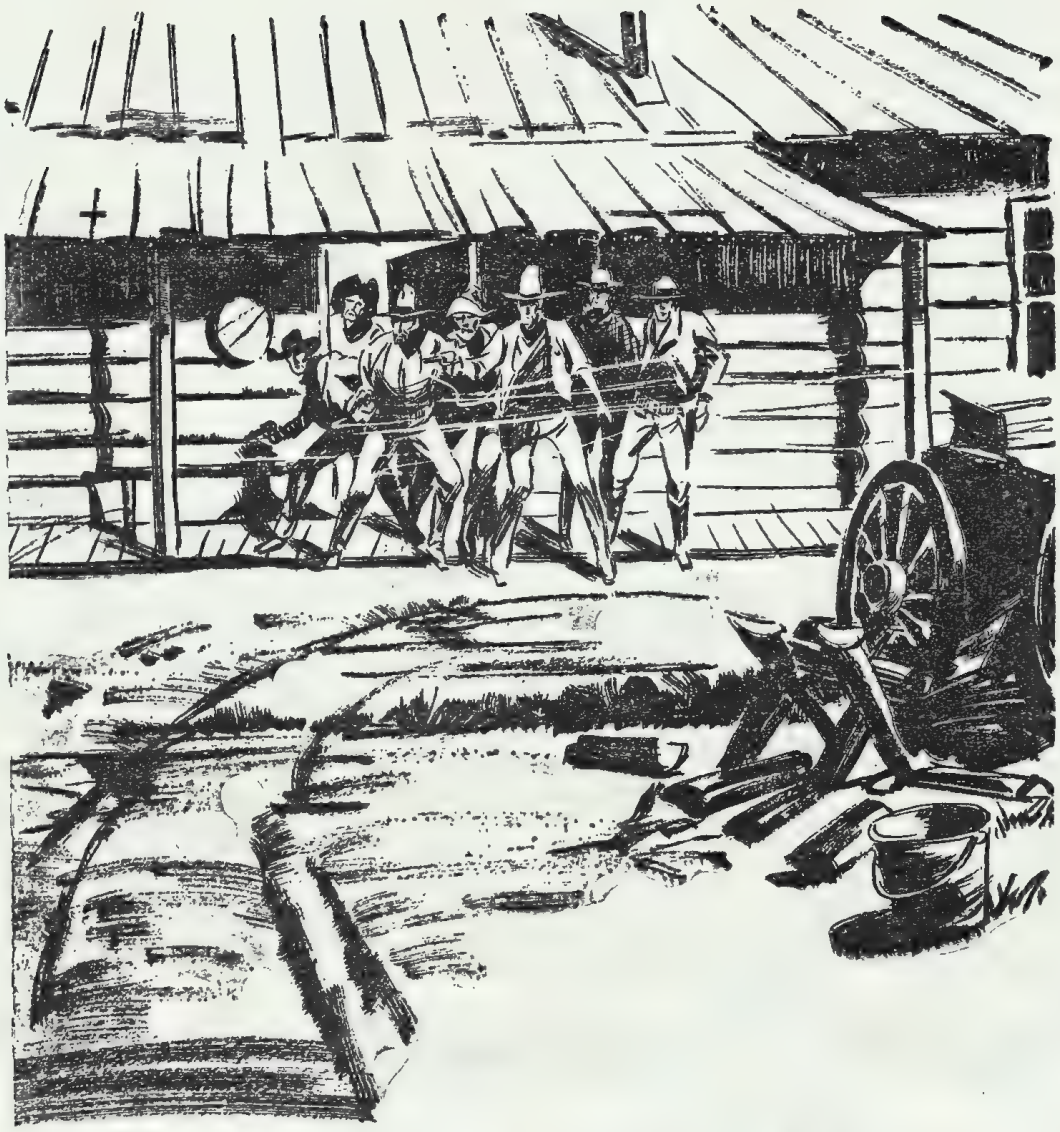
The Cheyenne Kid, through heavy lids, gazed up ahead at the rolling outline of Mustang Range, black against the starry sky. The high places were calling him—where a man could die with the sage-clean wind in his face, the brooding shadows of the ageless hills to stand sentinel for him at the gates of eternity.

ALWAYS LOOK FOR
THIS TRADE-MARK

THE yelp of coyotes, and his own tuneless hum, had been Tombstone Frane's music on the long trail north. But now, riding into Selby, there was added another song—the thin, high wail of a bullet viciously flung at him from ambush.

He'd expected something like this. Ex-Texas Ranger, Ex-United States Marshal, a professional gunman who had faced some of the toughest desperadoes of the two borders in defense of law and order, the price of his life was an alertness for ambush. Besides, he was here in Selby on business, and business meant that men might lie in wait for him.

A GREAT ACTION YARN OF A LAW GUNNY'S



SPAWN OF THE GUN-LOBO

by ERIC THANE

When he learned that by accepting a fortune from the hellions he was pledged to kill, he would make every kid in town a law-flaunting gunling, Tombstone Frane was willing to trade a sack of golden eagles for a boothill epitaph!

He wasted no time. He dropped out of the saddle and charged across the street. Instinct told him that no killer had fired the shot, and he saw when he rounded the corner of a store that he was right—a kid still in his early teens scrambled in retreat through the weeds of a vacant lot.

"Hey, there!" Frane called out. "Halt!" At the harsh steel in his voice, the youngster froze with defiant fear. He trembled,

PILGRIMAGE TO A POWDERSMOKE PURGATORY!

but snarled back like some animal when Frane seized his arm and shook him.

"See here, kid, what's the idea of tryin' to kill me?"

"C-Callon told me to!"

Tombstone Frane stiffened. Callon! The name held a familiar ring. Frane's eyes, invisible behind the squinting lids which gave to his wind-burnt face a dangerously sleepy expression, gleamed. He remembered. Callon's name had been mentioned in the letter he'd got from the mayor of Selby. Callon and Hardell. The men whom Tombstone Frane had come north from Arizona to drive out of Selby—or kill!

He muttered to himself, "So thet's the kind of coyotes they are, sic a kid onto me to do their dirty work! Wall, Callon an' Hardell, we'll see. . . ."

He was suddenly a little tired of all this death and dangerous life which made up his profession. He was giving up after this one last job—this task of cleaning up Selby. He was storing away his gun for good. He'd lost his taste for the wild music of gunplay. Besides, the country was changing; organized law had entered, and Tombstone Frane was of the old order that settled with powder and steel.

He pushed the kid forward, and grunted, "Better go back to yore nipple, son, an' wait a few years before yuh try gunnin'!"

He was turning away, acutely conscious of the ache all through him which cried for rest in a soft bed, when running footsteps jerked him alert. He spun, his tall, limber body tensing like a steel rod. A girl had darted through the weeds and was sobbing against the kid's head, which she'd drawn to her breast. A young, slender girl, body vivid with life.

FRANE glimpsed her eyes, shiny through tears. The kid's sister, he thought. Those eyes pierced through him, pleaded with him. Manifestly she'd seen what had happened. Her voice shook.

"Oh, please, he didn't mean it! Honestly he didn't!"

"A lead slug ain't easy to swaller, an I came blamed near swallerin' one!" Frane commented dryly.

"But—oh, sir, it's all Callon's fault!" Her cheeks flamed in anger. "I—I'd like to kill him!"

Frane heard his dry, hard voice remark, "That's what I'm here for, so don't you bother yoreself!"

"Are you Tombstone Frane?" Her eyes searched his face, seeking he didn't know what but surmised to be confirmation of some hope. "Are you the man the mayor hired from down south to clean up Selby?"

"Reckon I am, ma'am—"

"I'm Lois Thompson. I teach school here. This is my brother, Jack!" She released the kid and took a step forward, to Frane. She was small, Frane saw; her head came scarcely to the knot that held the dusty neckerchief around his throat. The trust suddenly roused in her eyes caused the Arizona man's pulse to throb with excitement—an emotion that not even danger could rouse in his cold, calculating and measured disposition. No person had ever before put the faith in him which she seemed to do.

"I'm so glad you're Frane! I—I was afraid you'd be like those other men the mayor got up here, brutes, all of them, who didn't think of a thing but their guns and earning money on the side. Two of them hired out to Callon and Hardell after the mayor had called them in!"

"An' what happened to the others?" Frane asked.

He saw fear leap into her eyes. Her cheeks whitened and a small hand went to her throat. "They're dead!" she whispered. The hand came forward; Frane felt it quiver against his arm. "You won't let them kill you, will you?"

"Not if I can help it!" Frane returned, in his hard, level voice. "This is my last job. I'm quittin'! Settlin' down, mebby. . . . Nope, I reckon I don't want to git killed right now. I aim to run them two skunks out of town, but if they won't run, I aim to kill them! I'll git them like I got others—let 'em draw first an' then smear 'em out!"

He said it simply, without boasting. He scarcely knew what he said; his voice was a far-away drone of sound. The exhilaration of the girl's interest in him was running like alcohol through his veins. He knew now why he was weary of the life he led; he wanted things that didn't go with death and killing, and foremost among them was the love of a woman.

"You don't look good to me!" the boy Jack cut in. "I reckon Callon'll polish you off jest as if you never was here!"

"You see?" Lois Thompson whispered.

"Callon's his hero. He's the hero of every boy in school. They worship Callon, because he's wild and irresponsible—everything a good man shouldn't be. If something isn't done soon, every one of those boys will grow up to be like Callon!"

"I reckon Jack's got a plumb good start headed fer the owlhoot!" Frane admitted. He addressed the boy, "So you don't think much of me?"

"Naw, I don't! I'm plumb put out that I didn't kill you! Callon'd have patted me on the back!" He ignored his sister's horrified exclamation. "I reckon you're the next who'll be goin' to boothill. There ain't nobody in the world as good with a gun as Callon!"

He spat importantly and stalked away. Frane turned to Lois.

"You see now why we're so anxious to clean up the town!" she said, her voice quivering. "It's bad enough when the desperadoes ruin grown-ups, but when they start in on the children—that's a thousand times worse! And a great many men here admire Callon in the same way. Some of them are in with him. Nobody knows who all of them are, so the honest men are afraid of a vigilante organization—they might include a spy, and Callon and his men would wipe them out like the murderers they are! But if Callon and Hardell were removed— They've either bought off or killed every man the mayor sent for to do that job!"

"How about the sheriff?" Frane asked.

"We have no sheriff. Nobody will run—and even if they did, Callon would see they didn't remain a lawman long! It's desperate, Mr. Frane! If something isn't done soon, this town will become altogether outlaw, and the few decent people here will have to leave! And—my brother Jack—he'll become an outlaw—"

Tombstone Frane's face was emotionless. Lois looked at him, striving to pierce the squint-slits which concealed all his thoughts and even the color of his eyes. The somber hardness of his jaw frightened her a little.

"Don't worry, ma'am!" was all he said. He was upon the point of saying more, some other word of comfort, when a horseman rode up. A red-faced, smooth-shaven man in his middle age; a fighter, Frane divined by the tight line of his jaw.

"Tombstone Frane? Welcome to Montana, an' to Selby. I'm Mayor Thompson!" He spoke with a soft accent that branded him a Texas man. His look swept from Frane to Lois. "What're you doin' here, cousin? Hadn't you better be back in the schoolroom?"

"Jack played hookey today, and I was looking for him. He laid for Mr. Frane and tried to shoot him! Callon put him up to it!"

Frane saw rage, carefully checked, in the mayor's face. "Run along now, cousin," he directed. "I'll see to Mr. Frane.

THE girl left. Halfway through the weed patch she looked back over her shoulder—back at Frane's face. Even at the distance, Frane could see the flash of her eyes. And a caressing interest that roused his pulses. It was seconds before he caught the thread of Mayor Thompson's conversation.

". . . . The railroad wants to build through here, but the officials are afraid the roughs might wreck the station an' do other damage. So we sent down to Arizona for you. Callon an' Hardell are the main desperadoes here; the rest are toadies, an' with Callon an' Hardell out of the way, the town would be all right. It would be safe fer the railroad to build through. As it is, if things ain't tamed down, they aim to build their line fifty miles north, around Gold Butte. . . . Figger you can handle things?"

"Always have!" Frane returned laconically.

"Yore reputation seems that-a-way, Mr. Frane. I understand you've got plenty of outlaw notches in yore gun. Yore life's been pretty rough, I'd say!"

"Too rough! I'm settlin' down after this job; got a ranch in Arizona I'm payin' on. I figure with the money I get from this job, I'll be able to put my full time in on thet ranch. Got a mortgage big enough to choke a horse on it, but I can work that off, with any luck an' a good calf-crop. Nope, I reckon after this job, unless I have bad luck on the ranch, I'm hangin' up my guns fer good!"

"Marryin', mebby?" suggested the mayor, smiling. "We have some nice girls around Selby. Or mebby you're already harnessed?"

"Nope. Still rovin' with the wild bunch. But I aim to get married some time, mebby!" He added, under his breath, "An' mebby I've found the girl!"

"Wall, luck to you. But be mighty care-

ful; we don't want boothill's bells ringin' before weddin' bells!"

Presently the mayor left, after directing Frane to a hotel where there was a room reserved for him. Frane located the sheriff's long-disused office, went in and dusted off the chair. He threw himself wearily into it. And thought. . . .

He knew he should be planning blood and death, but instead he thought of the little, black-eyed schoolteacher, Lois Thompson. Evidently she was the mayor's cousin. She was certainly beautiful, Frane thought. And interested in him. His heart accelerated. That ranch down home needed a mistress— He dreamed for a time, then decided to go to the hotel and get some sleep.

He went out into the hot, dusty street that slept under the heat of mid-afternoon. Before the Northern Hotel was a knot of men who eyed him curiously, without hostility or friendliness. He was about to enter the door when a whoop halted him. Down the street came tearing a dozen boys. Evidently school was just dismissed.

The leader was Jack Thompson. Instantly Frane thought of Lois. He divined that the girl thought the world of her brother, that Callon's influence over the lad hurt her keenly. Frane's lips tightened. He'd take steps to remove that influence. His hand dropped by instinct to the gun that hung in stripped-down holster strapped and lashed to hip and thigh. The holster that made men eye him warily when they first saw him.

Jack sighted him. And with the mob of youngsters on his heels, ran forward.

"There he is, fellers! The man who thinks he's as good as Callon!" He shook his fist and screamed out, "I tried to kill him, but I didn't! But Callon'll get him!"

They came close to Frane, thrust out their tongues and swore at him. Then one of the boldest, lifting a rock from the dust, hurled it forward. It splintered the wooden wall close to Frane's elbow. He stepped inside, quickly. Strange that he should be breathing hard! The taunts—and hatred—of men he was used to, but children were a different proposition. What a fiendish influence this man Callon had!

The clerk directed him to his room, and promised to take care of his horse. Frane went wearily up the stairs, and found his room. The door was ajar. Frane went in. Fatigue weighted him like some physical force. This, his last job, was going to be his hardest.

But what if it were not his last job—what if hard times on his ranch forced him to kill again? He didn't like to think of that. He stripped off his cartridge belt and neckerchief, from which a cloud of fine dust swirled.

It was then that he noticed the sack lying on the table. Curiously he opened it and peered inside. The yellow of golden double-eagles leaped out to stun him.

"Like them, Frane?"

His cougar-lithe muscles lifting him lightly, Frane spun to face the man who had been concealed in a clothes closet. A heavy-set man, not at all villainous-appearing, but with a cruelty and hardness in his eyes that appalled Frane. A gun dangled from his fingers. Now, he stepped slowly forward.

"Like them, Frane?" he repeated. "There's ten thousand dollars in that sack. Enough to buy that ranch of yours, lift the mortgage from it, an' keep you in comfort the rest of your days!"

"What do you know about my ranch, an' my mortgage?" Frane asked slowly. He didn't need to ask the other's name; he knew it instinctively. Callon!

"Matter of luck. I was standin' close to the store where you an' Lois Thompson an' the mayor were gassin', an' I picked up a few words!"

He spoke in a crisp voice that held none of the desperado. He didn't look the part at all. He might have been an ordinary businessman. But his eyes moved and wavered; they were the rolling eyes of a wolf, of a man desperately bad. Frane read them at once and knew the man for what he was.

"Yore gun is too far away, I reckon, so I'll put mine up!" the outlaw said, holstering his weapon. He smiled a thin, humorless smile that deepened the wolf-lines about his mouth. "Now listen to me, Tombstone Frane. I got a proposition for you. There's ten thousand dollars on that table. It's fer you—if you listen to us!"

"What does that mean?" Frane asked cautiously.

He wasn't surprised; long ago he'd got over the emotion. Death, disappointment, the swift change of events—he took them as they came. And he'd expected something like this, ever since the girl had men-

tioned that former lawmen had been bought off.

"Jest this, Frane: we don't have any quarrel with you, an' you've got no quarrel with us. Yo're jest doin' yore job. Yo're jest here to earn some money. Yore business is to drive us outa town or kill us. Wall, I'm raisin' the ante—I'm offerin' you ten times what Selby is givin' you. I'm offerin' it to you to get you out of town an' leave us alone!"

"Afraid of me?" Frane asked.

"Mebby, an' mebby not. We know yore reputation, an' I reckon of all the gunmen who've stood up to me, you'd come closest to outshootin' me. But I'm a businessman, Frane, an' my gamblin' in this town makes me plenty of money. You're gummin' up things. Better take that money an' high-tail south!"

"An' my job here?"

THE outlaw exclaimed impatiently, "I'm offerin' you ten times what Selby will give you!"

"An' if I don't take it?"

Animal fury and cruelty leaped into Callon's eyes. "There were a couple of hombres before who wouldn't listen to sense!" he remarked softly. "I reckon they ain't findin' boothill any too comfortable—too hot in summer an' too cold in winter!"

Frane went to the window and stared into the west, where the Rockies jutted like purple sawteeth above the prairie horizon. The weariness of his body and soul tugged him down. Ten thousand dollars—for riding away! No gunfight, no looking into the face of death, no unpleasantness. Just ten thousand dollars—enough to pay for his ranch, to lift the mortgage, to build up a herd sufficiently large to take care of him the rest of his life.

He could, in truth, hang up his guns for good. No more that last, sickening instant when he drew, to kill or be killed—the one moment in all this bloody business which he hated. The moment he put off as long as he could, until his opponent forced his hand. No more of that. . . .

But there was Lois. The first woman in whom he'd ever been interested. He was opening his mouth to refuse the desperado's offer when Callon, as if reading his thoughts, said, "An' while I'm thinkin' about it, Frane, don't let thet little schoolteacher keep you here. Lois Thompson is goin' to marry Colonel James, the owner of the James spread. He's worth millions. If she give you any encouragement today, jest remember she's marryin' him fer his money. . . ."

Frane seemed suddenly dead. He numbed all over, to the sensation of drunkenness. To despair. He heard himself laugh queerly. He'd heard of Colonel James and the James spread. And he'd imagined Lois Thompson as the mistress of his little two-bit spread in Arizona!

Ten thousand dollars, in golden double-eagles—

"All right!" he heard his voice grit out, in far-away tones, "I'm takin' the gold an goin'!"

"An' right now!" Callon persisted.

"Right now! Have my hawss brought around!"

He found himself out in the street, in the dusk. He must have walked down the stairs, but he hadn't felt them under his boots. Out here reality assailed him. His horse appeared, and a man at whom Callon waved.

"This is my pard, Hardell!"

Frane acknowledged the man's curt "Howdy," but without much realizing it. He gave Selby a last look. There were people on the streets, watching him curiously. Suddenly it came to him that they knew what was happening! Contempt was in their faces, in their eyes.

But ten thousand dollars was a lot of money . . .

"Yaa! Scairt out! What'd I tell you?"

It was the boy Jack. Frane twisted in the saddle and looked into the kid's triumphant—and jeering—face. There were other boys behind him, who now shouted and grimaced.

"Scairt out! I told yuh Callon was too good for you law-an'-order men!" Jack yelped.

Frane's mind moved slowly. Lois loved Jack—it hurt her to think that he patterned his life after the lawless—she'd pinned her faith in the gunman from Arizona. And now the gunman was leaving. Jack would grow up to be an outlaw—unless Callon was blotted out of the picture.

Frane took a deep breath. It didn't matter much, in the long run, that Lois would never be the mistress of his Arizona ranch. What mattered was that the country changed, that the old order which Callon and Frane personified, was vanishing. In the new order young gunmen, as Jack would

be, would most certainly be blotted out of the picture quickly. And Lois loved Jack . . .

Tombstone Frane spun his horse by short rein. He flung the bag of money into the dust before the hoofs of Callon's mount.

"Listen, Callon an' Hardell!" he ordered in his cold, deadly voice. "I'm the special marshal of Selby, an' I'm warnin' you two to be outa town by twelve o'clock. Tonight! Pack an' get!"

"So you changed yore mind, eh?" Hardell questioned. Some throat ailment diminished his voice to a hoarse whisper. But a deadly whisper!

"You two heard me! Outa town by twelve o'clock! If you're still here, I'm usin' lead force! I'll wait up in my room, an' on the stroke of twelve I start out lookin' for you!"

Callon dismounted and picked up the bag. He didn't raise his eyes or his voice, but his words were clean-cut and sharp as a pistol shot.

"At twelve o'clock, Frane, Hardell an' I will be in the Northern bar there down the street! An' we'll be waitin' for you!"

FRANE watched the hands of the clock, dimly illumined by the light of a smoky kerosene lamp, creep towards the twelve mark. With twenty minutes to go, he began to inspect his gun. At ten minutes to midnight, he'd made sure that his weapon would not fail him; he got slowly to his feet, strapped the holster about his hips, and thrust the dully-gleaming .45 into it. He tried his hand a couple of times, and was satisfied with his lightning draw.

Until this moment, as was his way, he'd been icy cold and emotionless. But now, with the ivory butt cuddled in his palm and the hands of the clock meeting towards midnight, he felt the thrill of the killer—a sensation he hadn't experienced in years. His breath shortened; his heart tumbled wildly. But he did not permit it to grip him; outwardly nothing appeared—this man with the half-closed eyes was a hard and ruthless statue of granite without feeling of any sort beneath. Which was the reputation by which the lawless knew him, and a reputation he'd uphold within the next few minutes.

He went downstairs and into the moonlit night. There was a barrel of water and a dipper near the door; he drank deeply but not too deeply to cool the fire that had roused in him. He went along the street. Flame jumped through his veins. And then he calmed himself with the realization that this was his job—this killing outlaws after he'd warned them. There must be none of the killer-lust within him. He shot to uphold law and order.

After that, he strode along as unconcernedly as a man going to his daily work.

But the steps that followed weren't so unconcerned; they pattered nervously along the board walk and came to a halt beside Frane. Lois! The moonlight touched her cheeks and hair, and the slender length of her body. Something within Frane shook at her beauty—and the fact that she could never be his!

"Oh, Frane, I—I heard about you! Callon's been bragging. Are you going down to the Northern and shoot it out with him?"

"That's what I contracted to do!" Frane said harshly.

"P-please, Frane, be careful! Callon is a killer!"

"So am I!" Frane reminded her.

"Frane, I—I think it was wonderful of you to refuse that bribe—"

Frane said nothing. He couldn't. Some force tugged at his throat, and muted him. So he walked on, ignoring her and never looking back, and presently her footsteps followed him no more. Then Frane ventured to glance back; sight of the empty, moonlit street made him feel queer inside.

He went swiftly to the Northern, and with his boot crashed open the swinging doors. He was unnecessarily violent, for the killer-rage had roused again, and he wanted to diminish it with a show of physical force before the final gun-flame showdown.

Inside the bar, the place was hushed and strained; the card tables were empty, with most of the men gathered at the bar. Frane saw why, and his lips were touched by a grim grin—the way to a swift retreat was open from the bar. Behind the mahogany top the keeper was swabbing glasses nervously. His eyes jerked shiftily when Frane entered. Obviously, he didn't want to appear nervous, and began to hum a tune which lifted sharply above the subdued hum of half-whispering men.

"The grass of old Montannay—
Is green as green as can—"

The words froze in his throat when Frane, stepping into a place magically cleared for him at the bar, ordered a drink.

"Yessir, yessir, Mr. Frane! Comin' up!"

Frane turned to face the room. He saw nothing of Callon the mild, or the whisper-

ing Hardell. But the eyes of many men were hostile, and their faces contorted with hatred. Frane swept them indifferently; he knew the breed, and knew that once he had killed Callon and Hardell these men would be as faithful to his law and order as they had been to the outlaws' disorder and crookedness.

"Any of you hombres seen Callon an' Hardell?" he inquired of them at large, "I'm special peace officer here an' I give them two hombres until twelve to pack outa town. It's twelve now!"

When no man vouchsafed an answer, he turned to the barkeep and repeated the question. That individual seemed almost in a faint, but mustered enough energy to pipe, "Nosir, nosir, ain't seen 'em!"

"I reckon mebby they've left town, then?" Frane pursued.

"I—I couldn't rightly say—"

The man's lips froze; his eyes stared with peculiar intentness and affright past Frane's head. And simultaneously the men at the bar began edging away. Frane laughed. He was cold as ice, with the killer-lust gone; filled only with his desire to have a disagreeable job over with.

He knew what was happening—Callon and Hardell, hidden up to this point in a back room, were advancing on him from behind.

"Yore licker is good, barkeep. Seein' as how I'm the special peace officer around here, I reckon I rate a drink free, eh?"

He leaned over, the bar top hard against his stomach, and poked the keeper in the chest. The man leaped as if shot.

"Nervous, barkeep? Take my advice an' sleep more! Sleep'll settle the nerves like nothin' else!"

"A good, long sleep is goin' to settle yore nerves for good!" Callon's soft voice purred behind him.

FRANE spun, in exaggerated surprise. "Callon, I didn't figure to see you here!" he ejaculated, "I figgered you an' Hardell would be outa town by now!"

"Jolly old cuss, ain't you?" Hardell whispered. He was a little behind Callon, and to one side. His eyes were harsh, as compared with the bland but dangerous gleam in his leader's coyote look.

"Well, well!" Frane permitted a thin, hard smile to ripple along his lips, "I don't exactly aim to spread sweetness an' light, but I aim to git on the best I can!" Then suddenly he made his voice jerk like the lash of a blacksnake, "I thought I told you an' Callon to be outa town by twelve!"

"An' I said," Callon reminded him softly, "that I'd be here at twelve!"

Frane was acting now. Acting as he'd acted before, a prelude to gunsmoke and lead. He said, "You boys are plumb tough about it, ain't you? I jest ask you peaceable to leave town, an' now you git nasty!"

"Mebby we'd better jest turn about, an' invite you to leave town!" Callon suggested.

"Ain't you boys jest uppity mavericks!" Frane jeered, "You can't be serious, can't you? Don't yuh remember it was me ordered you to leave town?"

He pushed himself away from the bar with his elbows. He took three apparently aimless steps to the left, placing distance between himself and the two men. A sinister movement; the onlookers recognized it, scattered, and the barkeep ducked.

"So you boys are intent on stayin'?" Frane said.

Callon stiffened, an imperceptible tensing of muscles that presaged explosive action. His fingers twitched. It wouldn't be long now. In a second Callon would draw.

Then it occurred to the Arizona man that he might himself be killed. It had always been thus—no thought of self until this last moment of action. And then a momentary dread of death, a brief moment when vision of himself lying silent on the floor tormented him. Visions and thoughts that vanished in a cool, merciless rage which found climax in the throb of guns.

Never once taking his eyes from the two, his fingers fumbled for tobacco and cigarette papers. He rolled a white cylinder expertly, ran his tongue along the edge, and with his left hand groped for a match. In his right he held the cigarette, steadied chest-high above the butt of his gun. Failing to find a match, he withdrew his fingers and held them out.

"I'm needin' a match. Got one, Callon?"

The man snarled out, his soft voice for once breaking, "I wouldn't give you anythin', Tombstone Frane! Hell, what we standin' here for? You ordered us out of town. What you aim to do about it?"

"Nothin'!" Frane returned. "Jest stand here an' wait fer a match—until you crack an' go for your gun! Then I'll kill yuh!"

Callon seemed to freeze, but his fingers continued to twitch with a slow, water-rippling motion. Behind him, Hardell tensed.

"Better wait until yore boss draws!" Frane jeered.

"Damn you, Frane, I'll kill you!" Callon screamed, breaking suddenly.

His hand dropped. Came up, flaming. Frane deliberately waited the fraction of a second which in the coroner's verdict would give him the judgment of self-defense. Then his hand dipped. The cigarette spilled to the floor, while the hand that held it straightened out to balance the other hand that drew a gun with the speed of light.

Frane felt the cold grip against his palm, felt the hard metal of the fanning hammer under the ball of his thumb. He heard the boom of Callon's weapon. And the hiss of lead close by him. Then his thumb lifted from the drawn-back hammer and his gun thundered with the voice of doom.

Not once. Three times, the shots blending into one continuous roar. Callon reeled and shook; his knees wavered, but with a tremendous effort he held himself erect. His eyes gleamed to the pale yellow of some desperate animal. Suddenly his face contorted; one hand went up to clutch his throat, and he toppled forward. But not dead yet; he writhed and kicked, and twisted over on his back.

Frane turned his attention to Hardell. The whispering man had withheld his fire momentarily, but now he opened up. He used both hands to fan his weapon, left fingers on the grip, right palm sweeping back the hammer. And he was appallingly fast. Then Frane unleashed his own weapon and fanned until the gun was empty.

Hardell took a step forward. He seemed to turn to stone. His finger froze on the trigger; his mouth dropped open in a ghastly expression of surprise. His eyes wavered, then focused in death. He crumpled to his knees. His gun clattered with a steely sound along the floor. For an instant he held himself upright on hands and knees, then he flattened out, chin against the floor. A wave of red seethed out from under him.

"An' that's another job!" Frane exulted. But even in victory his caution didn't desert him. He turned back to Callon. Just in time. The man, in the last moment before death, had raised his gun. Now it exploded. White flame seemed to tear through Frane. He reeled. He thumbed his gun, but the hammer smashed on empty cylinders.

But another shot wasn't necessary. Callon's shot had been his death-act; he settled back and his eyes focused into the same death-stare as his partner's.

Frane turned around. He was conscious of blood in his throat, of blood dripping from his chin. The room began to spin about him and blacken. He took a step forward. He heard himself gurgle out, "That's the end—" and then the darkening floor leaped up to meet him.

He awoke to a white bed, and a nurse bending over him. Also, there was an excited mumble he didn't place until he turned on his side and saw a bunch of kids, staring at him with awed looks. It was the bunch that had jeered him. There was wholesome, geunine admiration in their eyes.

Jack Thompson stepped forward. He held a flower, which he shoved at Frane. His eyes were big and round.

"Gee, Mr. Frane, you're good! A lot better than Callon! I'll bet all you men who uphold the law are better than Callon was! I'm goin' to be a sheriff when I grow up! Hey, fellows!" he called to his friends, "We're all goin' to be sheriffs when we grow up, ain't we?" They chorused assent.

"And now you'd better go!" the nurse said, and forced them out. Then, "Another visitor," she announced, and left herself.

It was Lois. She came to Frane's side at once, and her look stirred him.

"The boys are all changed!" she said. "You are Jack's hero now! Those boys are saved! They'll admire the law now—not the outlaw!"

"I—I reckon that's good!" Frane stammered, at loss for words. He didn't particularly want to be thanked. He was being paid to do his work.

"Frane, listen!" Lois whispered, coming very close, "you were delirious . . . you said something about Colonel James—"

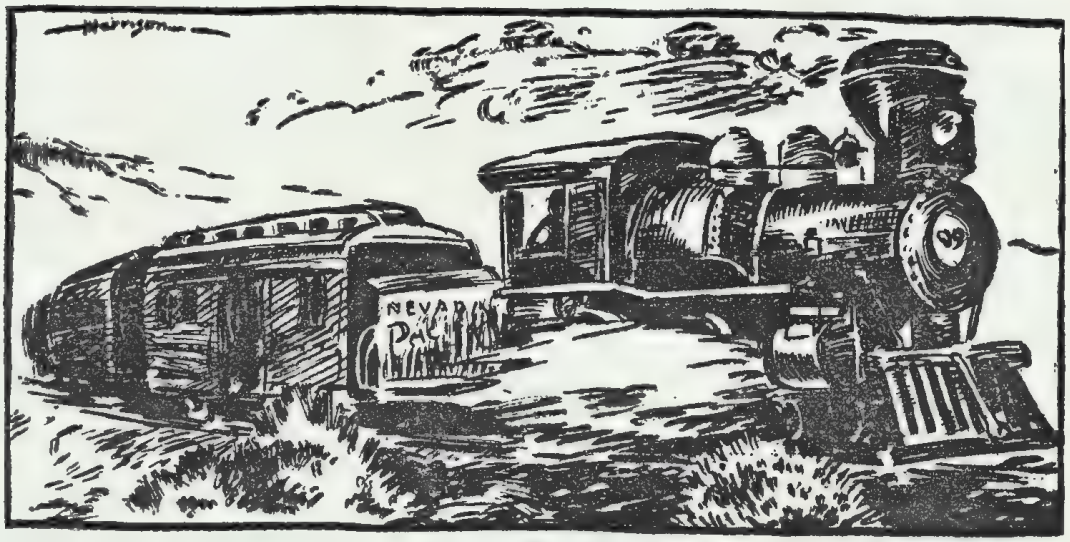
"Callon told me you were going to marry him!"

"That's another of Callon's lies! I'm not going to marry him! He's nice to me, but I'm not going to marry him!"

FRANE smiled. Suddenly everything was very peaceful, and he was comfortable. No need to tell her what Callon's lie had almost done. That was in the past. For the present—

He heard the sound of the boys playing out in the street. He looked at Lois, and his grin widened. They'd make a nice lot of lawmen—a good bunch to uphold law and order when they grew to be men!

CITIZENS OF BOOTHILL



by KENNETH P. WOOD

Robbing the Union Pacific was a job for any two-bit bushwhacker . . . until Seth Kennedy and his Cheyenne killers accepted pay to kill for the law, instead of against it!

"REACH for the roof!" was the command that greeted Conductor Edward Wilson.

Wilson threw up his hands first and thought about it afterward. In the dim light of the single night lamp burning in the Pullman car he saw indistinctly outlined the figure of a masked man, heavily booted and spurred. But there was one thing he did see very plainly, and that was the frowning black muzzle of a heavy six-shooter pointed directly in his face, and while the hand that held it swayed slightly with the movement of the speeding train, there was a real menace in the demeanor of the man behind the weapon. And as the shadowy figure forced Conductor Wilson back into the coach, a second man, also masked, took the place just vacated by his partner. Wilson noted that this man held a cocked .44 in either hand, so all thought of resistance fled from his mind.

Edward Wilson was conductor of the Pullman section on Union Pacific train Number Four, east-bound from Denver, on the Kansas branch of the road. Just after midnight on August 4, 1900, when everyone in the car, including the porter, was sleeping, and Wilson alone was on watch, the conductor heard a noise at one of the doors. Thinking that an itinerant bum, intent upon stealing a ride, had made his way into the vestibule, he unlocked the door, preparatory to ejecting the intruder. But, instead of finding a tramp, Wilson found himself peering into the round black eye of a big six-shooter, and before he realized it his hands were in mid-air.

Under the cover of the bandit guns the conductor was quickly hustled into the smoking compartment and given his instructions.

"Take this here sack," ordered one of the masked men, handing Wilson a canvas feed bag, "an' pass down the aisle an' wake up the passengers one at a time, quiet-like. Tell 'em to shell out their cash and jewelry an' they won't get hurt. But

AN ACTION THRILLER OF THE MEN WHO MADE THE WEST SAFE FOR RAILROAD TRAVEL!

the first kicker that opens his yap, I'll shoot his tonsils out! I'll be right behind yuh, with a shootin' iron. My pal here, will stand back in the door with his sixes full to see that yuh collect the pot. If I don't get the hombre who doesn't ante up as yuh tell him to, my friend will. Sabe? Now, first turn up the lights. . . ."

The conductor took the sack and started down the aisle with the bandit at his heels. He stopped at the first berth, aroused the occupant, briefly explained the situation, and ordered him to "shell out." He "shelled." Then he was made to stand in the center of the car in direct line of the levelled pistols held by the other gunman in the doorway.

On through the coach came the conductor. As each passenger was awakened and relieved of his valuables, he was forced to leave his berth and line up in the aisle, with upraised hands. Into the sack dropped purses and wallets, rings, watches, pins, and other things of value. Women were handled as roughly as the men.

"Just one more, and that's all," said the conductor to the bandit who was prodding him in the small of the back with the muzzle of his six-pistol.

THE last passenger, however, had already been aroused by the turmoil, and, peeping through the curtains of his berth, discovered what was taking place. The passenger in question was one William J. Fay, of Anaheim, California, an old man in his mid sixties. Fay, a typical hard-boiled Westerner, who had followed numerous wild gold rushes, was not intimidated at the sight of the bandit and his formidable-looking weapon.

So, when Wilson called upon Fay to "shell," that worthy reached under his pillow, and instead of producing a pocketbook, whipped out a revolver that matched up pretty evenly with the one in the hand of the stick-up man. A deft twist of his wrist brought the gun on a level with the bandit's face, but before his gnarled finger could tighten on the trigger, one of the pistols in the hands of the watchful partner standing in the doorway crashed with a reverberating roar, sending a heavy slug through Fay's head, and the nervy oldster slid out of his berth to the floor . . . stone dead.

During the excitement which followed the bandit in the aisle pulled the bell-cord and as the train slowed down both desperadoes rushed to the door and leaped into the darkness, carrying their bag of loot with them.

The hold-up took place just east of a little junction named Hugo, in Colorado, and half an hour later, when the station of Aroya was reached, the news of the affair was flashed by telegraph to the railroad headquarters in Omaha.

Immediately the wires commenced to hum, and before daylight every sheriff and marshal in Western Kansas and Eastern Colorado was notified to be on the alert for the robbers. Sizable rewards were offered for their capture, and railroad officials and Pinkerton detectives were soon hurrying to the scene of the crime.

But far more formidable than all the detectives and peace officers were the half-dozen passengers on a special train which swept down from the north, with a clear right of way over everything on wheels, not excepting the Overland Fast Mail. The six travelers were special railroad police, or rather, more accurately, professional gunmen, known as the "Bandit Hunters" of the Union Pacific.

This little organization of bandit baiters and trained gun-fighters under the able guidance of former Texas Ranger Seth Kennedy, a long-legged fighting fool built like a greyhound, with a prow designed for splitting the wind, was kept constantly in the employ of the Union Pacific Railroad. They had but one object—the preventing of crimes and outrages on the line wherever possible, and of pursuing and capturing the perpetrators all along the road. The headquarters of the unit was at Cheyenne, Wyoming, where a special train, in which they lived, was always at their disposal.

On this particular occasion the Bandit Hunters and their leader were more than two hundred miles west of Cheyenne, in the mountains of Wyoming, and therefore something over four hundred miles from Hugo, where the hold-up occurred.

At daylight on the morning after the robbery, notice of the affair reached the railroad police, an order coming by wire for them to "go down and get those men at any cost." Shortly after four o'clock that same afternoon the Bandit Hunters' Special pulled into Hugo and was side-tracked. Forthwith the six fighting men unloaded their horses and were ready for business.

Then the real man-hunt began.

EARLIER in the day local officers had picked up the trail of the two train robbers, but had subsequently lost it. A cattleman living near the point where the pair had leaped from the coach, reported the theft of two of his horses and furnished a good description of the animals.

Assisted by this information the Bandit Hunters started out. It was seen that the wanted men were headed for the vast cattle ranges of Northwest Kansas, where settlements were few and far between. Although the local lawmen had lost the trail of the fleeing bandits, the trained Hunters soon found it, and galloped forward in hot pursuit.

Night fell, and, rather than risk losing the trail in the darkness, the pursuers went into camp, but the first streaks of dawn found them up and ready for the long chase which lay before them. Leaving the line of the Union Pacific, the trail led northeastward, away from the towns and out into the unfenced grazing country.

At noon the cattleman's two jaded horses were found, calmly browsing beside the trail. This told the Bandit Hunters that the outlaws had roped a couple of horses from a small herd on the adjacent range and had thus secured fresh mounts. But the animals ridden by the pursuers were known to be the fastest and the best stayers in the West, and although the fugitives had many hours' start, the trailers realized that in the end they would be overtaken.

The hold-up men evidently knew exactly what to expect, for they were riding at top speed, and just before dusk the second day the Hunters came upon a dead horse lying beside the trail. They had literally ridden the beast to death. From the deep-cut tracks of the remaining horse, it was evident that the pair were riding double, which could not keep up for any length of time.

That evening the pursuers, completely exhausted, again rested for the night. When they took up the chase the next morning their mounts were fresh and ready for another hard day's ride.

Before noon a second horse was found, and the Hunters then knew that the fugitives were on foot . . . and to be "on foot" in that isolated region meant that a place of refuge must be quickly found, or else face the pangs of hunger and thirst.

From then on the trail was more difficult to follow, but, while Kennedy and his party could not quite maintain the same speed as on the preceding day, they were comforted by the assurance that they were traveling many times faster than the dismounted fugitives.

Just at nightfall the riders reached the cabin of a solitary homesteader, from whom they secured the information that the two men had passed that way during the middle of the afternoon. The homesteader had left his house about two o'clock and had gone to a field several miles away. When he returned later he found that his place had been forcibly entered during his absence, and the intruders had cooked themselves a good meal from his scanty supply of provisions. Two unwashed plates on his rude table proved that two people had been there, and the footprints around the cabin gave evidence that they were unmounted.

"Where's the next spread?" asked Kennedy.

"Fifteen miles northeast of here. The men are headed in that direction, if they don't get lost," was the reply.

"Boys," Kennedy opined, "our men will be at that house for breakfast."

They rested in the homesteader's cramped quarters until after midnight, and then set out again. Directed by the plainsmen, they rode leisurely toward the northeast, in the direction of the next ranch.

At daylight they were in full view of a fair-sized frame ranch building, and, with the aid of a pair of binoculars, made out the two fugitives plodding wearily along in that direction.

"There's our meat, fellows!" Kennedy exclaimed with enthusiasm.

Before the bandit baiters could overtake them, however, the desperadoes discovered that they were being closely followed and taking to their heels, they managed to reach the ranch and disappear inside while the trackers were yet a mile out on the open prairie.

FIVE minutes after they had entered the building, and before Kennedy's quintet, halting far out of shooting range, had decided upon a course of action, the terrorized occupants of the house, a husband and wife, made a hasty exit by the side door and came rushing toward the little group of railroad police. They explained breathlessly that the two interlopers had burst in upon them, and at the point of six-shooters had taken possession of all the firearms in the house, after which they were

ordered to "vamoose" on pain of death.

Kennedy posted a guard on either side of the building, and sent a rider with a flag of truce consisting of a white handkerchief tied to a stick, up within hailing distance of the house.

The rider shouted: "Will you come out quietly, or must we drive you out?"

There was a moment of tense silence. Then, by way of answer, a shot was fired from a first floor window and the Bandit Hunter's horse dropped to its knees and rolled over kicking, with a bullet in its chest. The rider dexterously alighting, scurried behind the thrashing animal for protection. From his position he was unable to safely retreat, so he drew his six-gun and waited.

Meanwhile, in preparation for a siege, the fugitives barricaded every door and all the windows on the ground floor, using the furniture for the purpose, after which they took up positions at the windows, where they could be seen with the field-glasses, loading their weapons.

The ranch house faced the south, and on the rear, or northern side, there were neither windows nor doors. Kennedy made a mental note of this fact, and planned his campaign accordingly.

"How much is that house and furniture worth to you?" he asked the ejected ranchman.

"About five thousand dollars, I reckon."

"Very well, I'll buy it for six thousand, and the company will send you the money as soon as I reach headquarters," replied Kennedy.

"Okay—it's yours."

"Is there any hay in that barn?"

"Lots of it. Help yourself."

Leaving the Bandit Hunter behind the dead horse to watch the front of the house, and keeping the same two guards on either side of the building, but well out of gun range, Kennedy, taking his two remaining men and the rancher, made a wide detour to the barn. By keeping that structure between them and the house, they reached the barn safely. Once inside, every man was told to fill his arms with dry hay, and to leave the place in the same cautious manner.

Kennedy instructed that the hay should be piled as high as possible against the north side of the house. An hour or more was consumed in making circuitous trips to the barn for hay, and during that time only an occasional glimpse was seen of the barricaded men who were unaware of what was taking place outside.

"Put a match to that hay, and then prepare to shoot to kill if those devils show sign of fight," was the next order. The hay was fired and soon the entire north wall of the wooden house burst into flames.

After a short period of watchful waiting, the side door flew open and out rushed one of the fugitives, gripping a pair of six-pistols, but he was too far away from the besiegers to use them with any accuracy. After a quick glance from left to right, he bolted for the barn, firing wildly at the officers as he ran, but before he had gone a dozen paces, a volley of Winchester lead crashed through the air from every side, and he sprawled headlong into the dust. Later, it was found that his body had received seven slugs, any one of which would have been fatal.

The other desperado could be seen at the window on the first floor, frantically endeavoring to open the sash as the smoke enveloped him. Then came a long tongue of red flame which drove him momentarily out of sight, but the next instant he appeared in the doorway from which his partner had made his fatal exit.

Leaping and crackling, the flames commenced to creep out around the door, silhouetting his figure in bold relief. For a brief moment he stood his ground, seeking some avenue of escape. But behind him was a roaring furnace; in front hunkered grim men drawing a bead on him with leveled guns. Then, before a single shot was fired, and in plain view of the Bandit Hunters, he placed the muzzle of his revolver against his temple and pressed the trigger. His head jerked to one side from the explosion and his body swayed in a semi-circle, toppling backward through the door the very instant that the roof, with a resounding crash, caved in, burying him under the collapsing conflagration.

LATE that afternoon, having accomplished their mission, although without the loot which they were unable to find, Seth Kennedy's Bandit Hunters rode to Goodland, Kansas, and thence back to Cheyenne, in their special train. While fighting outlaws was not an everyday occurrence with them, it was all in a day's work, and their pay was frequently earned the hard way—making the railroad safe for Western travel.

THE FORGOTTEN SHERIFF

by ROLLIN BROWN

The Jinx was only an old wagon cook in a greasy apron . . . but when a range hellion called a six-gun showdown, the unarmed Jinx proved he was tougher than that greed-ridden land hog and his blazing Colts!

IT WAS hot. The little cavalcade, jogging homeward, raised thick waves of dust across the alkali flat lands. It stung the eyes of men and mounts. Heat devils shimmered across country and made false mirages under the horizon rim of far, ragged hills. The riders were tired and the monotony of things hung heavy on their nerves. Specks in the midst of wide desolation, it was not the time to expect drama, deeds of action, the proof or the proving of men. It was more the time when weary minds think up some practical joke on somebody, anything to liven things up.

The A-Bar-1 outfit had shipped four hundred head of grass-fat beef and a hundred old cows and bulls, "canners," from the Lone Bluff siding. Nine cowhands and the owner's son, Lew Springer, all men under the age of thirty, headed the home-bound procession in the form of a tight fan of sweating mounts and riders. Behind the riders, with four free-pulling mules needing no attention, rattled the cook wagon. The Jinx slept on the wagon seat. To the rear followed the cavvy of spare mounts, hazed along by a single rider.

Mark Larkin, astride a long-legged hackamore colt at the peak of the fan of cowboys, spoke to Lew Springer, on his right, gesturing backward with a thumb.

"Look at him!" said Larkin. "Disgustin', ain't it?"

The lank, hard-faced Larkin referred to the Jinx, sleeping on the jolting wagon seat. The hot sunlight blazed full on the Jinx's crabbed, elderly features, dust settled over his skinny body, flies buzzed—but the Jinx slept. Lew Springer glanced back, took it all in and grinned.

"Happy anyhow," said Lew. "Jinx had a big night of it, last night. Stayed up till half-past ten, givin' advice an' recitin' the long tale of his past record an' woes to some of them new Windy Mesa boys that hadn't got wise to him yet. You was his main trouble again, Larkin. I guess he never will forget the time you jipped him outa fifty-eight cents at penny-ante poker."

MARK LARKIN'S head gave a single, stiff nod.

"A crook!" continued Lew Springer, imitating the shrill whine of the Jinx's

voice, for his own amusement and Larkin's. "'A bo'n crook, if they evah wuz sich a thing in human body. Thet's Mark Larkin! A thief, a safe-crackah, a highway-man, a thug, a robbah, a bandit! Ma'k my word, boys. Nevah trust thet same Larkin fo' a second. Fifty-eight cents it wuz, haza'ded in the noble game of chance, an' he took it frum me by foul cahd play. Not wu'th killin' a man ovah, I told m'self. But he cheated it frum me! It ain't the loss of the money so much thet peeves me, but it is the fac' thet a outfit like the A-Bah-1 will employ sich likes of 'im!'"

"Yeah?" said Larkin sullenly. He forgot for a moment that Lew Springer was the owner's son. "Yeah? Well, this same Mark Larkin is ridin' buckaroo boss for the old A-Bar-1 in the Sandy Crick country, come the first of next month. He was picked from ten other cowboys for the job. And just about then this same Larkin may be insistin' on a bit of hirin' an' firin' of his own, like as not. The Jinx is one man that had better watch his step."

"Aw!" said Lew. "Aw, don't take him serious like that, Larkin. Hell's bells, man—the Jinx ain't to be took serious. That's all. Besides, the Old Man has a strange likin' for him. He's been wagon cook with us 'most since the time I can remember."

"He gets on my nerves," snapped Larkin, but he remembered now that Lew was Old Man Springer's son. "Sure, I know. He's a good wagon cook as wagon cooks go. But he sure does need one lesson!"

Lew Springer was in decided agreement with this. "He does. He sure does, Larkin. But first one of the boys, then another, has been decidin' that same thing for the last six-seven years I can remember, an' been tryin' to give the Jinx his lesson. So far no one has succeeded to his entire satisfaction."

Hoofs clicked on the dry road; saddle leather creaked. One of the boys started to whistle a mournful tune, which broke off gradually in a dry throat. Dust settled over the cook wagon, and the rocking Jinx, who needed a lesson, slept on in peace. Finally Mark Larkin turned to Lew again.

"I got an idea," said Larkin, measuring the happy-go-lucky Lew out of the corners of his eyes. "A good idea. Lew, it must be quite a sum of money you're carryin' back to the Old Man?"

"Yeah," said Lew. "Yeah, it is. 'Most $3000 cash, along with cheques." Lew tapped his left-hand saddlebag. "All here. The Old Man banks up home, y'know."

Larkin nodded. "Look here, Lew: S'pose you'd keep all that cash in one parcel like, an' give it to the Jinx for safe-keepin', come about sundown this evenin'. We'll just about make 'Dobe Flat for an early night's camp. If you was to give the Jinx that cash to keep for you, it would swell his chest near to bustin', I reckon. It would make him feel about the most important man on the face of the earth. He'd carry on, tellin' what gun-play he's took part in an' his early sheriffin' experiences."

"Yeah," agreed Lew Springer. "He sure would. What point, though, in swelling his chest more'n it is?"

"Lis'en!" continued Larkin. "He'd feel the responsibility of that cash more'n an old hen feels day-old chicks, if you ever see that sight. He'd strut till he breaks shirt buttons. He'd begin givin' the boys all advice, all over again—pointin' to himself as the one man in the outfit that you'd trust with so much money. Get me?"

"Yeah," said Lew. "I know all that. But then what?"

"Then," said Larkin, "then, come sundown or thereabouts a bold, bad bandit rides in on him. He's alone, see? Get it? I got a hundred dollars in my pocket, Lew, that says the Jinx will hand over your money without a move to protect it. After all his high-falutin', big-chest blowin', he'll be a wiltin' violet when the moment comes. With the boys watchin' the scene from a distance, I reckon the kiddin' he'll just natchurly get afterward will hold the Jinx at normal for no tellin' how long."

"Who's to be the big, bad bandit?" asked Lew.

"Me! Ain't he got me figured for the world's worst crook anyhow, if he does happen to recognize me?"

Lew Springer, the Old Man's son, began to quiver all over. Chuckles shook him in the saddle.

THAT was the trouble with the Jinx. He was superior. He was boastful. He liked to hear himself talk. The boys could vouch for it. Whenever possible he cornered some one of the unwary and expounded various theories, mixed doctrines, cook wagon philosophy, boast and advice. As somebody expressed it, he was "hell on advice." Each knew he lied profusely.

With a studied contention, he talked gooseneck stickers in a land of curved-

shanked spurs. He asserted himself in any situation. He claimed to have been a one-time top cowhand on almost any of the famous old ranches, but he was hazy about dates and it could never be disproved. Many had tried, even trained horses for that especial purpose, but nobody on the A-Bar-1 had ever been able to get him to put a foot in stirrup. He was as wary as boastful. He would favor the horse brought forward for his fall with a haughty stare.

"Ve'y kind of you, my friend," he would say to the owner. "Thoughtful of you. But they's no hankahin' on my pa't fo' to ride you' animal. Since the days when I rode Sunfishin' Roan—famous buckah on th' famous old 101, that not any man evah befo' me had rode to a standstill—well, yo' unda'stand how it would be. Pa'don my sayin' it, but in them days we was like to give animals like that-un of you'rn to the Injuns, in exchange fo' some knicknack or othah—"

That was the way it went. When guns were mentioned he had been a sharpshooter, a gun-fighter and a one-time sheriff and marshal. He had cleaned out bandit and rustler nests single-handed. But since days as rousing as those he had never cared for simple target practice. "No, nevah, yo' unda'stand." In a country of the long, braided rawhide riatas, he contentiously championed the short grass rope, tied hard and fast to a saddle horn. Several of the A-Bar-1 boys remembered his advice to Chuck Wells. Chuck had crossed him in an argument over ropes and told him he was an old fool and several things like that. With great dignity, the Jinx said:

"Chuck, I'm sho' sorry fo' to hear yo' talk like thet. Allus I'd thought yo' wuz a lad of some judgment an' sense. Now I dunno. I dunno, Chuck. Someday I wouldn't be a bit su'prised to hear of yo' gittin' all thet long riata of your'n tangled, snubbin' a stee-ah to yo' saddle horn, an' losin' a fingah in yo' dallies, Chuck."

It was no uncommon thing to happen, if a man was a little clumsy or careless for some reason. Casting the noose of his long rope over a steer's head, he snubbed swift turns of the riata around a saddle horn, to hold against the shock, his pony sliding stiff and braced. But from that piece of advice the Jinx got his name. The next day Chuck did lasso a big steer, he wound stiff dallies around his saddlehorn and the shock of the big animal, coming to the end of the rope, happened too swiftly or something. Chuck had two fingers tangled in the snubbed turns of the riata and bone and muscle was pinched off against the saddlehorn.

The Jinx was haughty, patronizing, set in his ways, boastful and a liar. He was scornful, resentful and opinionated. He was petty—for instance, the incident of his loss of fifty-eight cents to the hard-eyed Mark Larkin, in penny-ante poker, an event nine months transpired and never forgotten for a moment. But he was a good wagon cook, he was the best wagon cook, according to Old Man Springer, that the A-Bar-1 had had in the twenty-five years of his ownership. Yet if ever a man needed a fall, it was the Jinx. Surely no man had ever needed it more.

The boys were of a single opinion on the matter.

The dusty cavalcade of the A-Bar-1, returning home from the Lone Bluff siding where they had shipped four hundred head of fat beef and a hundred canners, made mid-afternoon camp in 'Dobe Flat. 'Dobe Flat was a little mesa. A low range of hills rose to the east; there was water at the base of the hills. The cook wagon went over there. Wood was gathered.

"Pretty early camp," said Lew Springer, the Old Man's son. "What d'you say, boys? Let's hit up country a spell, an' see how stock's makin' it over on this end of the range. Grass looks pretty burned."

A few riders caught fresh stock from the cavvy, to make it all convincing. And just before they were leaving, Lew went over to the Jinx.

"I'm bringin' quite a wad of money home this trip," Lew began easily. "More'n I like to carry about with me in a saddlebag. How's for leavin' bags and money here with you?"

The Jinx's eyes fairly popped when he saw the roll of bills. With all of his dignity, and a greasy cook's apron, he attained his fullest, skinny height. But even then he glanced suspiciously at the lank, hard-faced Larkin, tightening a saddle cinch within hearing.

"Lew," managed the Jinx, "ten yeahs I been with the A-Bar-1. Ten yeahs of faithfulness. Let me compliment yo' on yo' judgment, in yo' choice of a man of trust—a one-time sheriff, gunman an' ma'shal of law an' peace."

LEW SPRINGER, who knew they were somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty miles from human habitation and

who would not have hesitated to leave money 'most anywhere about, simply nodded.

"Aw, just keep an eye on the stuff," he said. "That's all. Oh, a-course, if anybody would show up—well, you know."

"I know, suh," said the Jinx. "A man of my reco'd."

As they went into the saddles Ed Jessen whispered in Lew's ear:

"Sure there ain't a loaded firearm about? He might do sumpthin' at that."

Lew shook his head, chuckling all over. "Nothin' but the camp shotgun, Ed. I drew the shot from its shells ten minutes ago. Now for the performance."

The riders rode across the close rim of hills, circled and moved back. Mounts were left in a gulch behind, so that no whinny would betray them. Only Mark Larkin remained mounted. He had borrowed an extra six-gun, stuck in his belt. He had traded hats with one of the boys and chaps with another. He rode a fresh horse from the cavvy. And after half an hour the hard-visaged Larkin, with a bandana drawn up to the bridge of his nose, rode back alone across the rim of hills.

The boys had grandstand seats behind stunted sage, hillocks and boulders. Larkin chased the skinny Jinx, apron flapping, twice around the cook wagon. He fired the round of one of his guns into the air, with staccato detonation. He had the Jinx on his knees for a while. Then Larkin commanded Lew Springer's saddlebags, took them, wheeled the fast horse he rode and in a swirl of dust crossed the mesa and dropped into the next gulch beyond.

The A-Bar-1 finally scattered back to their horses, met in the gulch behind the hills and talked it over. Was it two times or three that Larkin had chased the Jinx around the wagon? And prayin' on his bended knees—the forgotten sheriff of Pecos County, in its wildest days! It was a never-to-be-forgotten show, a sporting event. Then everybody mounted, the happy-go-lucky Lew Springer in the lead, and rode back to camp.

Somewhat to everyone's surprise the Jinx bent over his fire, stirring pots as usual. Before anybody said anything, he called:

"Grub pile!"

The boys fell into line. The grub was as good as usual. They ate, squatted about on the ground, looking at each other. They had expected the Jinx to be frothing at the mouth, with the excitement. But he wasn't. So everybody held their choicest comments, waiting for Lew to bring up mention of the money the Jinx was keeping for him.

They finished eating. When Lew Springer stood up, however, he didn't say anything to the Jinx, but he said rather crisply to the cavvy tender:

"Bring in them hosses again!"

"What — what's up?" asked Ed Jessen after a minute.

"Larkin was going to head up with us over there in the gulch," said Lew. "He didn't. Neither have I seen him anywhere about on the mesa. It's been close to an hour. Yeah, I reckon you boys better saddle, too."

They found that Larkin's trail made no attempt to circle back, but hit straight south as fast as one of the best A-Bar-1 horses would carry him. This was the first beef-ride the Old Man had ever trusted Lew to manage, and Lew could see how he was going to hate facing the Old Man now. The riders split.

IT WAS late when they began to straggle back into 'Dobe Flat by twos and threes. The skinny form of the Jinx, hunched over his fire of embers, waited for them. He had coffee ready and big warmed-over biscuits. Riders helped themselves and stood about in the shadows. They were silent.

Midnight passed before Lew and Ed Jessen, the last, rode in. But behind them these two brought a led horse and rider. The rider was Larkin.

"We found him down at 'Sote Well," explained Lew. "But the saddlebags were empty."

Men, standing about in the shadows, began to mutter softly.

"On my word!" the hard-eyed Larkin pleaded. "There was nothin' in them bags. I turned 'em inside out. I tell you there was nothin'. Y'see, I'd sort of figured to play a joke on all you boys, ride off down there and give you all a scare."

"No," said Lew. "You rode too far. Some miles too far, Larkin."

"There couldn't a-been nothin' in them bags when I took 'em," Larkin protested dully. "I'm tellin' you straight. Yeah, if you want the rest of it, I didn't have no intention of stoppin' at 'Sote Wells. I rode that far before I discovered 'em empty. Now, you got the truth. There was nothin' in them bags! You won't believe me, but I'm tellin' you the Jinx took that money before I got the bags. That's the only thing

that could have happened. He stole it first, the dirty, lyin' little sneak!"

"Suh!" said the Jinx, at his full height. "Suh, do yo' realize who yo' ah accusin' of sich a thing? The one-time Sheriff of Pecos County, in its wu'st days; a man thet fought the Denvers Gang single-handed, as Ma'shal of peace. Watch yo' step, suh!"

Somebody sniggered. In a fury the Jinx stood before them. Then something seemed to snap. The Jinx was suddenly just an old man, in a greasy cook's apron, and his skinny, old body trembled in the glow of the fire embers. All the swagger was gone from him, all the mock dignity.

"Suh!" began the Jinx. "As a one-time, two-gun officah, down in— Aw—aw, what's the use? Yo' all don't believe me. Yo' all nevah have. I'm jist an old windbag, Jinx of the outfit. Sho' I know it. But allus since I kin recollect, I'd calculated my chance to be somebody would come some day. Allus figgered thet way, an' was hopin' an' waitin' fo' it. But it nevah come till today. Mebbe thet's why I took to talkin' so much."

One of the boys muttered something that wasn't heard. Somebody tried to laugh.

"I ain't nothin'," said the Jinx. "I nevah been nothin'—but a wagon cook. Othah fellas allus tellin' what an' where they been an did, an' me jist tellin' lies to make up fo' what I ain't. But today—today I seen it. I seen my big chance. Thet thief Larkin watchin' every move Lew makes. I knew he'd be back aftah thet money. I could see it in his eyes. An'—an' it wuz my chance to prove myself. Then—then—"

Lew Springer nodded very thoughtfully. "Yeah, sure. Sure," he muttered.

"But I ain't got the nerve," explained the Jinx. "I ain't got the nerve to face him, when my chance is come. So—so I took thet money an' hid it. I hid it in the flour sack. Thet—thet wuz all I could think to do."

THE JINX stood staring down into the glow of the fire embers. There was silence. Lew Springer finally went over to the back of the wagon, and when he returned one arm was white with flour up to the elbow and the hand held a thick wad of bills and checks.

"Allus," muttered the Jinx, "I'd figgered some day to be a man of reco'd. Mebbe my chance wuz jist too long a-comin'."

"Record?" said Lew Springer after a while. "Record? Say, Jinx, I'm sayin' you got the record of bein' the best judge of men on the old A-Bar-1. Larkin was goin' on as buckaroo boss next month."

They saw the Jinx's head lift.

"Thet—thet's right. Sho' if yo' look at it thet way, thet's right. Yeh. Well, suh, yo' see it wuz fifty-eight cents he stole frum me, in a penny-ante game of pokah—"

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The big man raised his rifle to his shoulder.

THE DEAD ARE IN THE SADDLE

by DICK ROBSON

After ten years of drifting, Lon Haferty fogged back to demand a legacy of black gold . . . but when he learned that the one man who could prove his claim had been hanged for his killing, Haferty realized he was a gun ghost whose only legacy would be a boothill tombstone!

THE kid the border country knew as Drifter was well up in the pinon pines on the slope when he first spotted the three riders below him close to the freight road. He reined up and watched them speculatively a moment.

They weren't over a hundred yards away down in the rocks and their horses were a trifle farther down the slope below them. The three of them looked hard. One was a big, bull-necked man with a nose that was twisted sideways. The other two were smaller, one of them dark and swarthy and the third sandy complexioned. The kid took in their greasy, unkempt outfits and set them down as being trouble hunters for someone.

Their horses were what interested him most. It wasn't often a man ran onto horses like those up in Wyoming, and still more rarely did he find such rope cheaters as these men apparently were riding them. All three animals were bays and showed a strong strain of Morgan blood in them. They were big, rangy brutes, not at all like the mountain ponies he had been seeing for weeks now, and they had cost someone considerable money.

Mentally the kid figured the good points of each horse against the four-stockinged black he was riding and decided a trade, quite possibly at the point of a six-gun, wouldn't be profitable.

He was about to turn back deeper into the pines when the big man below him stood up, grunted something to the other two, and took a long, barrel telescope out of a case he had laid on the ground.

A thin smile flickered across Drifter's lean features as he watched the big fellow

aim the telescope down the white, dusty freight road and squint through it. They were watching for the stage, quite possibly, coming down from the upper Wind River country to meet the railroad at Halfway, ten miles farther on. From the slope where the kid sat he could see the road, and he could see that the only moving object in sight was a solitary rider jogging along about half a mile back.

DRIFTER'S eyes flickered narrower. Instead of skulking down deeper into the rocks to let the lone rider pass, as he expected them to do, the three men below him edged up closer to the road, keeping well out of sight in the lava. The kid whistled softly to himself and rubbed the back of his neck. He wasn't watching a holdup but a bushwhacking.

Well, it wasn't his business, he reflected. His business was in Halfway, ten miles farther along the trail. He wondered how much the town had changed in the years he had been away from it, and more particularly what old Bill Edmo would be like. He had been only twelve when Bill had decided he would be safer if he cut loose from Halfway until the railroad boom was over, so there would be a lot about the town that he wouldn't recognize.

It was even hard for him to recall what Bill Edmo looked like, even though old Bill had raised him from a three-year-old when his father, Tex Haferty, had met a man faster with a gun than he was.

The day he left, old Bill had told him, "Kid, there's coal on this land yer pa left ye with, and the railroad's comin'. There's men in this country'd slit your throat to get that coal now, so I reckon you're better off out of here until things smooth down. I'll have ye a fortune though, boy, when you come ridin' back."

The kid's hand dropped to his six-gun, then away from it again while he watched the three men directly below him, and the fourth rider jogging up toward them. Why in hell should he mix into that, he wondered, when it didn't concern him; and if there was a killing maybe get it pinned squarely onto him, when all he had to do was to ride down to Halfway and claim his inhertance.

His mouth twisted into a thin-lipped grin. Hell, he'd be crazy to take a hand. For ten years, since he was twelve years old, he had been kicked around from one range camp to another, half starved at times

(Continued on Page 96)

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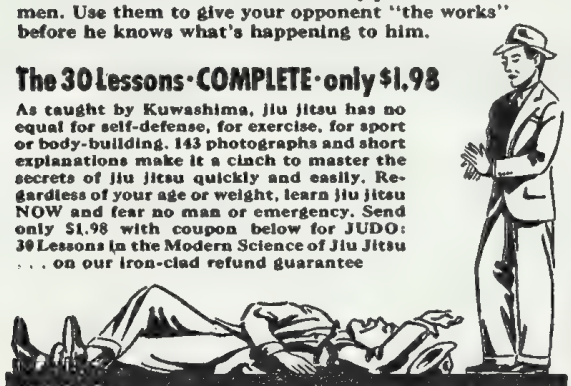

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and freezing because he was broke and couldn't buy himself a slicker and chaps. For ten years he had thought about those coal beds Tex Haferty had staked out for him, and he had waited and dreamed sometimes of what he would do with the money when he was of legal age and could claim it. Not much, he wasn't taking any chances this close to Halfway.

The rider coming down the trail took off his hat and mopped his forehead. Drifter could see his long, white hair blowing out in the wind and could see the sweat glistening on his round, smoothly shaven face. The kid set him down first as being a preacher, then as maybe a cattle buyer, and finally as a politician or a school teacher. He looked thoroughly harmless.

The three men directly below the kid they called Drifter were sprawled out in the rocks where they would be concealed from anyone on the freight road. While Drifter watched, the big man raised his rifle slowly to his shoulder.

The kid started to rein away. It wasn't his funeral. Hell, when a man's gone hungry and cold for ten years, he'd be plumb loco to throw away his right to a fortune. The kid's hands touched the reins; then he turned back again for another look.

His face twisted up a little, and he hesitated. He was a hard case, that kid they called the Drifter. There was a little row of notches along the underside of the barrel of his .41 Colt to prove he wasn't safe to crowd too far, and if a man didn't care for that kind of proof, the kid had never been particularly averse to backing his play and adding another notch. There were plenty of places back to the south where he was reckoned bad.

The rider on the freight road started to whistle, and the big man's rifle arced slowly upward and centered.

The kid could feel his hands trembling. Hell, they were going to shoot the old fellow down and never give him a chance.

In an emergency, some men are cold as ice and think calmly. The kid didn't. If he had stopped to think, he would never have done anything. His mind simply stopped functioning the moment his right hand touched his gun grip.

The .41 spun out of the holster, leveled off, and cracked once. The bullet zinged on rock, and a little cloud of lava dust puffed up into the big man's eyes.

For a second nothing happened. The big man simply lay there, clutching his

rifle, the other two staying hunkered where they were, and the man on the road stopped whistling in the middle of a bar.

Then the big man dropped his rifle and began clawing at his eyes. The gray-haired man's hands went up to his chest, and for an instant the kid thought he might have been hit. He wasn't, though. The kid involuntarily caught his breath at the speed with which a brace of six-guns leaped into the man's hands from shoulder holsters beneath his coat.

The big man bellowed something, and the rifle of his sandy-haired companion blasted. It blasted a second too late, though.

DRIFTER'S Colt cracked again. The sandy-haired man threw up his rifle, clawed at his chest, and came rolling out of the rocks and finally landed, sprawled out, in the center of the freight road.

The white-haired rider was thumbing the hammers of his guns and letting them drop back with deadly regularity. The kid knew he couldn't see either of the bushwhackers who were left, but from his bullet spurts, he was throwing his lead uncomfortably close to them.

The big man howled and bolted for his horse down in the rocks. His companion followed him. The kid could have dropped either of them, but he did nothing. That wasn't his quarrel, and his estimation of the old fellow's ability to take care of himself had risen considerably.

He started to rein away, and a bullet plopped into his saddle pommel. The kid whirled, snarling a curse.

The white-haired man was still sitting his horse directly below him, looking up, from beneath white eyebrows; and he held his guns leveled across his saddle.

"Come out of there, ye scalliwag," he shouted. "Come out of there, I tell ye."

The kid cursed harshly. That was a nice mess he had landed himself into, all right. The old fellow thought he had been doing the bushwhacking. He reined down to the road, because there was nothing else to do.

"Well?" Drifter demanded.

"Kind of young to be mixed up in Trude Lyman's schemes, ain't ye? A mite too young to be diggin' yourself a grave, goin' around tryin' to back-shoot a man."

"Put up that six," the kid said through his teeth. "And get this straight. If it hadn't been for me, you'd be deader'n a stuck toad."

For a moment the kid couldn't tell

(Continued on Page 98)

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(Continued from Page 97)

whether the man facing him believed him or not. Then he threw back his head and laughed. It was a deep belly laugh. It made his round cheeks shake and his pale blue eyes twinkle beneath their white, bushy eyebrows.

"Deader'n a toad, ye say. Well, maybe you're right and maybe ye ain't. Wanted to see if you had gumption to talk back to me. Yes, sir, if it hadn't been for you Gus Wilkins wouldn't be running for district judge, sure 'nough. How ye votin', by the way?"

Wilkins' hands moved so quickly the kid could hardly see them move, dropping his guns back into the holsters, then jabbing out again. The kid blinked when he saw the old fellow was holding a cigar and an election placard in his right hand.

Drifter took the cigar. "Don't know as I'm votin'."

Drifter hastily bit into the cigar before Wilkins had time to snatch it back, then transferred it to his vest pocket. Wilkins laughed again, "Good cigar that is, sir. Five for a nickel. Nothing's too good for my constituents. But now, sir, you're either votin' for me and law and order, or you're on the side of Trude Lyman, sir."

"Trude Lyman." The kid's memory was creeping back over those ten years of hell he had put in. Somewhere, way back in the past, the name of Lyman awakened a memory. Bill Edmo used to be afraid of Lyman, he remembered rather hazily.

"Wouldn't say this Lyman feller was kind of thin-faced without much hair and smarter'n hell, would you?" he asked.

"Just so, just so," Wilkins boomed. "Smarter'n hell and twice as crooked. Now as I was tellin' ye—"

"Never mind." The kid jerked his finger toward the sandy-haired man lying in the center of the road. "What you going to do with that?"

"I?" Wilkins looked grieved. "I do with that? I'm no undertaker. It strikes me he's yours."

The kid lit into swearing again. Wilkins was pretty smart, he reckoned profanely, running for district judge against Trude Lyman and not wanting to get saddled down with a shooting. Things were shaping just about as the kid figured they might. Here he was loaded with a killing before he even got to Halfway.

"What about this Lyman?" he demanded.

Wilkins motioned to the man in the road. "Gregor there was his man. Lyman

has the country by the throat, and he's squeezing. Made his money from coal when the railroad came, and now he runs the county. He has every office cornered, and he's taxing out the ranchers now. Those that don't pay sometimes wish they had."

"You figure you can beat him in the election?"

Wilkins puffed out his chest, then chuckled down in his throat. "When I ran for dog catcher, I received twelve votes. I expect nearly that many this time. Well, good day, sir, and I certainly appreciate your vote you promised me."

The kid swung down from his horse, hooked one boot onto a lava rock, and built a smoke. He regarded the dead man with a crooked grin. "Reckon you and me might see some more of each other yet, Gregor," he said flatly.

He finished his smoke, brought Gregor's horse up from the rocks, and boosted the defunct Mr. Gregor into his saddle and lashed him there. No use leaving him in the road where he would be found anyway, and the kid, being a stranger, would be saddled with the killing.

Despite himself, the kid couldn't help liking Gus Wilkins who was running for district judge. It would take nerve to buck an organization such as Lyman apparently had, an organization that could deal in murder without any fear of apprehension.

THE kid left his two horses at the hitch rack in front of the sheriff's office down in Halfway and stepped up on the plank sidewalk without even glancing around at the crowd staring at the load on his lead horse. Men stepped back out of the way when he turned his pale, half taunting eyes in their direction. He had the earmarks of being bad.

The bleak-looking buzzard-faced man glanced up from the desk when the kid slouched into the office. "You the sheriff?" Drifter demanded.

"I'm Hank Forbes, sheriff of Wind River County. Why?"

The kid jerked his thumb out toward the two horses. "Fellow out there had an accident. You'd better bury him 'cause the weather's kind of hot."

"Huh!" The sheriff came up out of his chair and strode with quick cat-like strides to the door. "By God," he muttered. "It's Gregor. By— Hell, he's shot from the front, too."

(Continued on Page 100)

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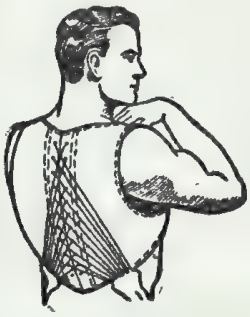

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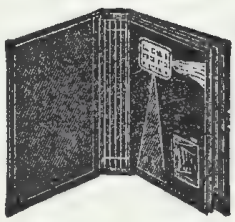

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"Accident," the kid said jeeringly. "Figured he could pick a bullet out of the air, and he couldn't."

"Yeh?" Forbes whirled back toward the kid they called Drifter. "You're going to start telling me you stood up to him and beat him in a square fight, eh? Well, damn you, I'll tell you a few things."

The kid's voice was still mocking. "Maybe. Maybe I might talk a little bit out loud about what this ranny Gregor was doin' when he got that misguided notion of his."

"Just what in hell do you mean?"

"I ain't above lookin' through a dead man's pockets sometimes. He's got a wad of bills that'd choke a good-sized cow, and he don't look like the sort that'd work for it. Now maybe he was hired to do something, and maybe you know what he was hired to do, and maybe I do, too."

Forbes didn't say anything for a minute, just stood there staring at Drifter while his face got more wintry than ever and his eyes hooded over like a buzzard's.

"We'll talk this over inside," he finally said very softly.

The kid followed him back into the office. He couldn't tell yet whether his bluff was going to work or not. He did know, though, that Hank Forbes was a cold-blooded devil and dangerous as a copperhead.

"Name?" Forbes demanded.

The kid shrugged. "I'm called Drifter some."

"Yeh? Know anybody around here can identify you?"

The kid built a smoke, lit it, and stared at it a moment. "Yeh, I got a mighty good friend around here. Bill Edmo."

"Bill Edmo!" Forbes came half out of his chair, then settled back down. The kid could see his hand sliding underneath his desk and knew it would be closing over a gun. "Bill Edmo's your friend, eh, you damn murdering skunk." He laughed as though at some joke of his own and leaned forward, thrusting his gaunt face close to the kid's.

"Want to know about Edmo, eh? Never heard tell of a kid called Lon Haferty, did you, that was a son of Edmo's old partner. Well, damn you, Edmo killed that kid ten years ago, just a twelve-year-old he was, slit his throat and buried him under a hundred ton of shale he blasted down onto him.

"Happened there was some witnesses seen it though. Trude Lyman was prose-

cutor here in the county then, and it didn't take him long to round up witnesses to the whole thing—him and me, that is. What you think of that?"

The kid studied his smoke. For a moment his eyes had snapped open. Then he caught himself and wiped all expression off his battered face.

So he was dead, was he? Dead with his throat cut and buried under tons of shale rock for ten years. It seemed to him that Trude Lyman's name kept cropping up wherever there was anything that smelled bad.

"Where's Edmo now?" he demanded.

Forbes ran his forefinger around his skinny neck. "Trude Lyman and me know how to handle killers. Still say Bill Edmo was your friend?"

The kid's knuckles stood out white as his fists clenched together. Bill Edmo was dead, hanged for the murder of a youngster who had never been killed. He sat there staring at Forbes while his face grew steadily grayer. Forbes and Trude Lyman had lied and bribed old Bill Edmo into a hang rope.

"Yeh, he was my friend," the kid said softly. He stood up very deliberately and let his hands drop down to his sides. Lyman had gotten his start in coal that he sold to the railroad, and the kid knew where that coal had come from—from the Haferty ranch that it had taken Bill Edmo's murder to get.

"Yeh, he was my friend," he repeated, and his hand began to snake to his gun grip.

THE kid they called Drifter never heard the door open behind him. The first intimation he had that anyone besides him and Forbes was in the room was when a six-gun barrel smashed down on the back of his neck.

The blow knocked him across the room. His body struck the wall and slumped down. He wasn't out, but pain and nausea paralyzed him. He could see the man who had struck him standing in the center of the room looking down at him, and smiling craftily.

The man was thin and dapper with three or four gold teeth in the front of his mouth and thin black hair combed carefully over a bald spot on top of his head. He very deliberately lit a panatela cigar without shifting his gun from covering the kid.

(Continued on Page 102)

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5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
6.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
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COWBOY SHORT STORIES

(Continued from Page 101)

Trude Lyman. The kid's memory flashed back.

Lyman nodded. "I thought you'd recognize me—Haferty."

"Haferty!" Forbes squalled.

Lyman nodded again and rolled his cigar around in his mouth. "Yes, he's Lon Haferty all right. I've been looking for him to drop back this way. It's a good thing I didn't leave him to you or those deputies to handle like I did Wilkins.

"You know, Forbes, that little story we cooked up ten years ago came awfully close to boomeranging back at us. We'd both stretch rope if that happened. Get Pearson and Jenkins over here."

The kid got unsteadily to his feet. His head felt as though it were ready to crack open like an overripe watermelon, and black spots kept jumping in front of his eyes. He swayed groggily against the desk.

"Take off that gun, Haferty," Lyman ordered.

The kid's hands hesitated at the buckle of his gun belt. Lyman's gun swung up, and he unstrapped the belt and let it drop. Trude Lyman was holding the cards then. If Drifter made any move to resist, Lyman would shoot him down and claim he had been preventing a prisoner from escaping. Lyman motioned him to a chair.

"How'd you like to swear Gus Wilkins hired you to kill Gregor?"

The kid wet his lips. "What'd happen if I did?"

"Wilkins is doing too much talking. I've got a good thing here, Haferty, too good to risk losing. If you were to play ball, I might—understand, I say I might—suggest to Forbes he let you escape."

"Yeh? And shoot me in the back when I did," the kid snarled.

Lyman shrugged disinterestedly. "If you made the story convincing enough to hang Wilkins, you might get away. You wouldn't be coming back, though, because there'd be a murder charge here for you."

The kid's thin face twisted into a wolfish snarl. "You go to hell."

The street door opened, and the big, bull-necked man and the smaller swarthy fellow the kid had seen back along the freight road followed Forbes into the office. Lyman grinned crookedly.

"Recognize him, Peterson?"

"You're damn right I do." The big man came toward the kid, his head outthrust on his thick shoulders, his face dark with an-

ger. The kid noticed his eyes were red and bloodshot from the rock dust that had spurted into them. "You're damn right."

Peterson's fist shot out and caught Lon Haferty in the face. The kid rocked back, blinking and trying to get his hands up. Peterson kicked him against the wall.

"Well?" Forbes demanded. "What we doin' with him?"

Lyman puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. "What's your idea?"

Forbes ran his finger around his buzzard neck. Lyman grunted and shook his head. "Takes too long. It's too close to election time to have him talk in court and stir up a stink. Know of a nice quiet place outside of town—a barn or something?"

"There's that old feed barn about a mile out," Jenkins said in his flat, dry monotone. "It'll be dark in a couple of hours, and we can shove him underneath the floor."

"Think you can handle it, Forbes?" Lyman grinned.

Forbes took a quick, menacing step toward the kid. "You're damn right we can handle it."

The kid leaned against the wall, trying to blink some of the fog out of his head. Blood trickled down his face from a cut above one eye and mixed with the blood coming from his mouth. He could hear what they were saying all right, and he knew just about what his chances were.

His cut mouth twisted derisively. Coming back to Halfway to be rich and live like a white man, was he? Hell, he had come back to be shoved down into the muck underneath the floor of a deserted barn. Lyman and Forbes couldn't risk having him alive. If he ever turned up, that story they had cooked up years ago and hanged a man with would be shot as full of holes as a sheepherder's hat.

Maybe the people of Halfway were buffaloed and afraid to say anything against Trude Lyman and that tin-horn sheriff then, but give them a little leverage to pry with—Lon Haferty turning up alive for instance—and they would pry the skids right out from under Lyman's whole crowd and lift them up onto a scaffolding and drop them feet first through a trap door. Their feet wouldn't quite touch bottom when they fell, either.

The kid's luck had run out, but he wasn't going to beef about it. His lips trembled a little while he listened to the four of them

(Continued on Page 104)

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COWBOY SHORT STORIES

(Continued from Page 103)

calmly pronounce his death sentence, but he managed to grin.

Forbes chuckled down in his throat and reached out to grab the kid's hands. The kid they called Drifter didn't have a chance, but he was game for a try, anyway. He threw all of the strength there was left in him into the fist he shot at Forbes' throat.

Forbes took the fist squarely on the larynx. He stopped, and his mouth dropped open. The kid didn't have time enough to see any more than Forbes gaping and trying to shout and not making a sound before Peterson and Jenkins piled onto him.

Peterson and Jenkins were masters at this art of beating a man up. They did a good sound job on Drifter, too. Peterson planted a number twelve boot in the kid's stomach, and Jenkins stepped in close, shooting his fists and letting them twist when they struck so that his knuckles tore flesh like a pair of spurs.

The kid went down, and he felt handcuffs snap around his wrists. He was only half conscious that Forbes was taking a hand, too, kicking him and cursing in a hoarse whisper while he still massaged his injured throat.

LYMAN took his cigar out of his mouth and grunted. "You're making too much noise. When you get him out to the barn find out what he told Wilkins."

"Yeh, we'll find out all right," Jenkins affirmed.

Groggily, he saw Jenkins go to the back door of the office, look out into the alley and motion that everything was clear. Forbes jerked him to his feet and kicked him toward the door. It took Jenkins a few minutes to bring horses around into the alley. Two men passed the door of the sheriff's office while the kid was slumped there with Forbes standing over him, holding a gun against his back, but neither man paid any attention. The kid reckoned that the people of Halfway had learned long before not to show too much interest in what Forbes and Lyman might be doing.

Lyman stood in the doorway of the office, rolling his cigar around in his mouth and watching while the other three loaded Drifter onto a horse and tied his feet in the stirrups. "You coming?" Forbes demanded of Lyman.

Lyman shook his head. "Killing makes me sick. I can't eat for two or three days

after I see a man die. You take care of this."

The jarring of the horse and the dusty, acrid smell of sage cleared Drifter's head a little. The sun was slanting down low against the jagged glacier-capped peaks of the Tetons a hundred miles away to the west, sending long, flat shadows from the rock hummocks they passed snaking out over the prairie. Drifter had an idea he would be alive only as long as it took the sun to set and the purplish twilight of the high mesas to settle down.

He turned to Jenkins and managed to get his battered face fixed into a grin. "How far's the barn, anyhow?"

Jenkins spat tobacco juice. "What do you care? We're the ones that's got to ride back."

They topped a long, bare hogback ridge and dropped down onto an abandoned ranch. Drifter took in the layout without much caring about it—some poor devil squeezed out by taxes he guessed. The house was caving in, poles were sagging in the corral fences, and coarse prairie grass grew in bunches in what looked to have once been a garden.

The barn was still in fair shape, though a blizzard some time before had torn most of one side out. Forbes reined up in front of the barn and swung out of his saddle. "Not likely anybody'll hear any noise out here," he observed, letting his bleak eyes run appraisingly over the kid.

Once inside the barn, Peterson flung Drifter back onto a pile of moldy hay and turned to Forbes for directions. Forbes kept wetting his lips and grinning as though enjoying himself.

"You tell Wilkins who you are?" he demanded.

Drifter swore at him through clenched teeth. "Got nothin' to say, damn you."

"No?" Forbes kept juggling the spur and finally bent over and held the rowel close to Drifter's eyes. "I ain't got much patience, not with a killer like you. Either you talk or you get this run through your eye."

"Go to hell."

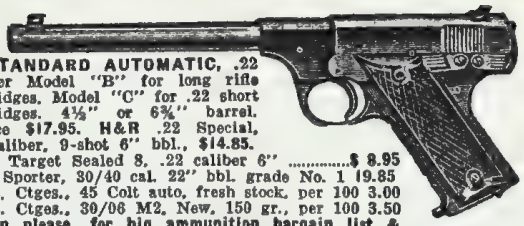
"I'm goin' outside," muttered Jenkins.

"Yellow?" Forbes snarled at him.

"Naw," Jenkins shook his head. "I've seen you and Peterson work on too many guys. Go ahead. I don't need no more education watchin'."

"Then get a shovel and pry up some of

(Continued on Page 106)



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COWBOY SHORT STORIES

(Continued from Page 105)

the boards over in the horse stalls," Forbes ordered. "See if you got guts enough to do that."

"Nervy as hell, ain't you, Forbes?" the kid spat. "Reckon you damn near got guts enough to kick a man when he's down."

"What'd you tell Wilkins?"

Drifter watched the spur come down to within an inch of his right eye. He tried to pull back and couldn't for the pile of hay he was up against. He could feel sweat beading on his forehead while he watched that spur come closer.

It didn't do any good to tell himself he wouldn't be needing that eye long, anyway. He hoped desperately though he wouldn't let Forbes see how scared he was. The kid's body tensed.

"Listen," he whispered hoarsely, "if I tell you every damn thing I told Wilkins, what then?"

Forbes rocked back on his boot heels. "Why we might turn you loose. Hell, if you string along with us—"

Drifter wasn't fooled any there. They weren't going to turn him loose, no matter how much he told. As sure as fate he was going to get shoved down into the muck underneath the floor, but he could make dying awfully hard for himself if he wanted to. He wet his lips and gulped a couple of times.

HELL, he didn't have a chance, handcuffed as he was, with only his feet free, but he hated to die, too. At twenty-two life looks awfully good to a man when his chances of seeing much more of it are slim.

"Listen," he said desperately. "I never told Wilkins much. I just told him who I was and that if he'd get some papers I cached he could prove it."

"You did, huh?" Forbes stiffened. "Where's them papers?"

"Gimme a smoke, and I'll tell you. Say, listen, there's a cigar in my vest Wilkins gave me. Light that up for me, and I'll tell you about them papers."

Forbes hesitated for an instant, then reached for the cigar, jabbed it into Drifter's mouth and lighted it. He was careful to drop the burned match into the cuff of his levis. "All right, where's them papers?"

Drifter puffed desperately on the cigar. The resinous, ropy taste of it almost choked him, and the thing smelled like burning cow dung. That crazy, almost hopeless plan

he had hatched up had to work. If it didn't, Gus Wilkins' life wouldn't be worth a phony nickel when Forbes and his crew got back to town. The kid's fists were clenched where they were handcuffed in front of him. The knuckles stood out white. Somehow he had an idea that Wilkins would have wanted him to take that gamble if there was a chance of hitting back at Trude Lyman.

From the other side of the feed rack, he could hear Jenkins' shovel prying up the floor boards.

"Them papers—" he began, then hesitated for a second. "They're up in Montana."

For a moment he was sorry he said that. Forbes had only to look at his outfit—short boots, Spanish-rigged saddle and bullhide chaps—to know he had come from the south. But Forbes wasn't thinking of that. He was bending forward, still fingering the spur and watching the kid through hooded eyes. "Where abouts in Montana?"

"Up in Miles City, in the bank," Drifter lied. He could read in Forbes' face exactly what the sheriff intended to do. Forbes put down the spur and brought his gun out of the holster very deliberately. He hefted it and thumbed back the hammer.

"Ain't that nice, now?" he grinned. It was only going to be a matter of seconds now, the kid knew, before that gun would crash. From around the feed rack he heard Jenkins shout. "I got this hole big enough any time you want to roll him in."

Forbes' gun arched up. "You poor damn sucker," he whispered at the kid through clenched teeth. "You—"

Drifter rolled over. He had been holding his muscles tense for what seemed like hours, watching that gun. As he rolled, he lashed out with both feet at Forbes' legs.

The gun roared, and Drifter felt the bite of the bullet in his left arm, which he had thrown out in front of him.

He spat the cigar out, hoping it would fall where he intended it to, and hurled his body at Forbes.

His arms, manacled in front of him, were useless. One arm he couldn't raise at all, and the other was more in the way than useful. Drifter dropped his shoulders down, then hunched up quickly. His driving shoulder caught Forbes in the brisket and hurled him back. Something struck Drifter from behind.

The kid whirled—right into Peterson's

(Continued on Page 108)

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(Continued from Page 107)

long, ape-like arms. Peterson grunted curses and clutched at him. The bigger man hadn't had time to go for his gun, but Drifter could feel his hand jerking down to his holster between them. Drifter tried to rush Peterson off his feet and break the hold of those vise-like fingers that were clawing at his throat, but it was like hurling himself into a tree trunk.

Peterson slobbered curses and held on with one hand while he brought his gun up with the other.

Drifter caught sight of an ear and got his teeth into it. Peterson howled and jerked his head. The kid held onto the ear while the big man forgot his gun for an instant and tried to knee him in the groin. Most of the ear came loose from Peterson's head.

From somewhere off by the wall Forbes' voice came. "My God, the hay's on fire."

Peterson only grunted. The kid hadn't realized until then that murky black smoke was swirling through the stable and that he was choking. Peterson got hold of his broken arm and twisted. Drifter gagged with pain, but he managed to get his head down against Peterson's chest.

He threw all his weight forward. Even then he wouldn't have jarred Peterson if the man hadn't tripped over a manure fork on the floor. Drifter felt the fingers slip off his throat as Peterson went down. Smoke suffocated and blinded him.

He could hear Jenkins shouting something from the feed rack. A gun spat and licked out with orange flame at him from the wall where Forbes was huddling. He threw himself at Forbes as Peterson grabbed at his boots.

The kid's boot touched a face, Peterson's, and he ground his heel down into it hard. He went down sprawling, through, and Forbes' gun belched out at him again.

HIS groping fingers touched the manure fork that Peterson had tripped over, and he got it into his one useful hand. He couldn't see Forbes, but Forbes couldn't see him, either, for the smoke and darkness with the dull red glow of the hay fire licking through it.

Forbes fired again, and the kid lunged, holding the pitchfork straight out in front of him, aiming at the gun flash.

Jenkins' gun roared behind him, and the shock of the bullet sent Drifter sprawling toward Forbes. Forbes squealed like a stuck

pig when the flat-tined fork skewered his body to the wall.

Drifter tried to jerk back. Forbes' dead weight falling against the fork jerked it from his hands. Then above the crackling of the fire he heard another voice shout from outside.

"Move along there fast, I tell you, sir, or I'll blow the whole top of your head off."

"Wilkins is out there," Jenkins shouted. "Forbes, can't you hear me? Wilkins is out there, and he's got the boss with him."

Forbes didn't have anything to say, not wtih four pitchfork tines run through his chest. Drifter turned and stumbled through the fire that licked hungrily at his levis.

He couldn't have told how he reached the feed rack, but Jenkins wasn't there when he reached it. The dry hay leaves in the rack were blazing, and the fire was licking up the posts into the loft. Drifter cursed a stream of profanity while he groped for Jenkins. As though from a long way off he heard Wilkins' voice again.

"I know you've got the youngster in that barn, Lyman, and if he doesn't come out, you're going in after him. Believe me, sir—"

The crack of a gun cut Wilkins short.

Ahead of him through the open side of the barn, Drifter saw the stars lying low against the Tetons. He hesitated a moment. If Jenkins had fired that last shot, he hadn't a chance in that direction. Flames were licking at his boots again when he stumbled toward the free air outside.

He almost ran into Trude Lyman groping toward him, whimpering and cursing, and Gus Wilkins prodding Lyman along with a six-gun held against his kidneys. When Lyman saw Drifter, he turned and tried to bolt. One of Wilkins' long-fingered hands shot out and hauled him back.

"No sir, you don't. The first job I'll have as judge is to sentence you to hang, and, by heaven, sir, it's just like I told the voters, I'm not a man to shirk my duties."

Drifter was leaning against Gus Wilkins' horse when the old politician came over to him, still prodding Lyman along.

"Never knew a Haferty yet that knew when to die," he observed dryly.

"You spotted who I was then?" the kid asked unsteadily.

"Right off the bat. Knowed your paw before ye, and sort of recollected his father a little, too. Now, sir, since you're votin' for me, will you have a cigar?"

THE kid called Drifter began to swear. He was a hard case, and his language showed it. He hinged his profanity together and then broke it apart and made it crackle.

"You damn, cast-iron-lunged old fool, give them rolled-up pieces of cow dung to them that ain't goin' to vote for you, and you'll poison all the opposition in the county!"

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DAY OF DISASTER
by CLEM BARTON

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2 Smashing Novelets

BAD BLOOD CAN'T BE BOTTLED . . . Charles Boswell

Guns hadn't gotten Paul Thompson's lovely daughter into the Junior League, nor had they given Paul the svelte, gorgeous body of Ketty Nestle . . . But now he must forget his riches and shoot to kill! . . . For of what use would Ketty Nestle's charms be to a doomed hot-squat hostage?

SCUM OF THE BORDER
Ernie Phillips

Gyp Hoffman's was a perfect racket. He brought the dames down south of the border to use their flesh to lure the customers . . . but the ghosts of the chippies he had murdered were already weaving the web that would drown Gyp in his own yellow blood!

6 Action Packed Stories

FLESH LURE . . . . . Hubert La Due
HEAVY SUGAR IN HAVANA
Undercover Dix
THE DUMB DIE YOUNG
Lloyd Llewell
SUCKERS WANT DAMES
Hugh J. Gallagher
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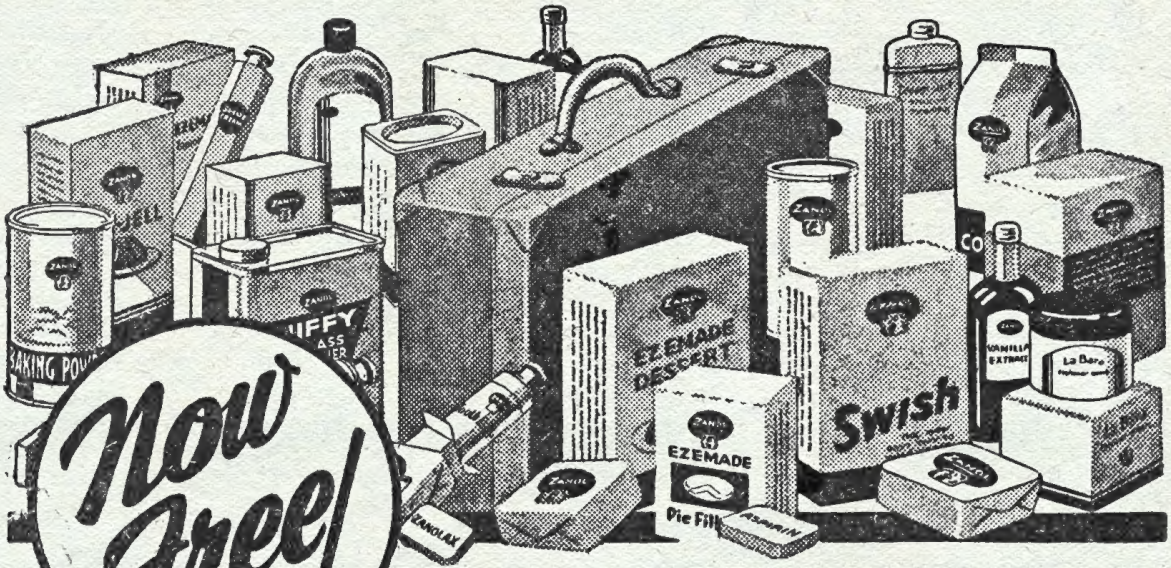

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